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*INDIAN SHORT STORIES*



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*SHER-SHAH THE BENGAL TIGER*

BY N. GANGULEE

*FAREWELL, MY FRIEND*

BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

# INDIAN SHORT STORIES



SELECTED AND EDITED BY  
MULK RAJ ANAND  
AND IQBAL SINGH

THE NEW INDIA PUBLISHING COMPANY LTD.

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*M A D E I N G R E A T B R I T A I N*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Short Story is one of the oldest literary forms of India—and the youngest.

The fables of ancient India, the earliest of which are to be found in the *Chandogya Upanishad* and which have exercised profound influence on other literatures of the world, can, in a sense, be regarded as the prototype of short story as an art-form. We know, for instance that the cycle of moral apologues embodied in the *Panchatantra* followed in the wake of caravans that moved westwards across the Middle and Near East from the earliest period of the Christian era and reached all the lands bordering the Mediterranean—and beyond. Under the command of the enlightened Sassanian monarch Naushirvan these fables were translated into Pahlvi; and from this translation were derived all the subsequent variants known to us. The Arabs, the Greeks, the Latins, the mediaeval divines no less than the secular fabulists of the French Renaissance, drew on this reservoir of literary and moral themes, each adapting them to their particular genius and purpose. No less important has been the influence of Indian fairy tales and romances, which, as Weber has pointed out in his *History of Indian Literature*, provided the original inspiration of "most of the Arabian, Persian and Western fairy tales and stories." Similarly, the Buddhist Jataka stories, which were carried back by ardent Far Eastern pilgrims to the Buddhist Holy Land, have become inextricably woven into the imaginative fabric of the literatures of China and Farther Asia.

In more recent times, however, India has been a recipient rather than a transmitter of literary influences ; and historical circumstances have determined that these influences should be largely Western. The contemporary Indian short stories, therefore, often tend to have a somewhat hybrid character, reflecting a duality at the point of origin and approach. On the one hand they still retain a significant, if increasingly tenuous link with the old fables and folk narratives, which accounts for their obsessive didactic strain. On the other, they show the unmistakable impact of the Western tradition as represented by the English, French and Russian short story writers. The working out of a synthesis of these two modes is one of the major problems confronting the Indian writers to-day.

As a literary medium the short story in India is still in a transitional phase of development, with the various tendencies not yet fully crystallised, and any generalisation regarding it would be premature and hazardous. One thing, however, needs to be stressed. The significant feature of the Western short story is the subtle interplay, indeed interpenetration, of situation and character which produces the climax and leads to the ultimate dénouement. But in most Indian stories these two elements of the theme are very sharply differentiated ; there is little interplay, and what we witness is a series of collisions which seem to set up an unresolved crisis. This abruptness of treatment is not necessarily a fault of the Indian writers. It may well be that the background of life with which they have to deal does not lend itself to the same kind of formal treatment as the material with which the European writers are concerned.

We are aware that the Western readers are apt to find that the work of Indian story writers often savours too strongly of raw life and lacks that neatness of plot and construction with which they are familiar in the work of European writers. We feel, however, that what the Indian writers lack in technical virtuosity is in some measure compensated for by their earnest and insistent

preoccupation with the condition of humanity, their quick sympathies and quality of pity. And these are by no means negligible virtues in a world which seems to have a surfeit of cleverness and too little compassion.

The present collection of stories is, we believe, the first of its kind to appear in England. It is a tentative effort and claims neither exhaustiveness nor perfection. A more fastidious choice would have been, no doubt, more satisfying from a purely literary point of view ; a less fastidious selection might have been quantitatively more representative. As it is, we feel the stories included in this collection give a fairly comprehensive idea of the main trends among the Indian writers of our time, both those who write in English and those writing in the various Indian languages. We hope it will awaken interest in the contemporary literatures of India. That is the limit of our ambition.

EDITORS.





# THE CASTAWAY

*Rabindranath Tagore*

Towards evening the storm was at its height. From the terrific downpour of rain, the crash of thunder, and the repeated flashes of lightning, you might think that a battle of the gods and demons was raging in the skies. Black clouds waved like the Flags of Doom. The Ganges was lashed into a fury, and the trees of the gardens on either bank swayed from side to side with sighs and groans.

In a closed room of one of the riverside houses at Chandernagore, a husband and wife were seated on a bed spread on the floor, engaged in earnest discussion. An earthen lamp burned beside them.

The husband, Sharat, was saying : 'I wish you would stay on a few days more ; then you would be able to return home quite strong again.'

The wife, Kiran, was saying : "I am quite well now. It will not, cannot possibly, do me any harm to go home now."

Every married person will at once understand that the conversation was not quite so brief as I have reported it. The problem was not a difficult one, but the arguments for and against did not advance it towards a solution. Like a rudderless boat, the discussion revolved round and round the same point and at last threatened to culminate in a flood of tears.

Sharat said : "The doctor thinks you should stay here a few days longer."

Kiran replied : "Your doctor knows everything."

"Well," said Sharat, "you know that just now all kinds of maladies are abroad. You would do well to stop here a month or two more."

"And at this moment I suppose every one in this place is perfectly well."

What had happened was this: Kiran was a universal favourite with her family and neighbours, so that, when she fell seriously ill, they were all anxious. The village wiseacres thought it shameless for her husband to make so much fuss about a mere wife and even to suggest a change of air, and asked if Sharat supposed that no woman had ever been ill before, or whether he had found out that the folk of the place to which he meant to take her were immortal. Did he imagine that the writ of Fate did not run there? But Sharat and his mother turned a deaf ear to them, thinking that the life of their darling was of greater importance than the united wisdom of a village. People are wont to reason thus when danger threatens their loved ones. So Sharat went to Chandernagore, and Kiran recovered, though she was still very weak. There was a haggard look on her face which filled the beholder with pity, and made his heart tremble, as he thought how narrowly she must have escaped death.

Kiran was fond of society and amusement; the loneliness of her riverside villa did not suit her at all. There was nothing to do, there were no interesting neighbours and she hated to be busy all day with medicine and dieting. There was no fun in measuring doses and making fomentations. Such was the subject discussed in their closed room on this stormy evening.

So long as Kiran deigned to argue, there was a chance of fair fight. When she ceased to reply, and with a toss of her head disconsolately looked the other way, the poor man was disarmed. He was on the point of surrendering unconditionally when a servant shouted a message through the closed door.

Sharat got up, and, opening the door, learnt that a boat had capsized in the storm, and that one of the occupants, a young Brahmin boy, had succeeded in swimming ashore to their garden.

Kiran was at once her own sweet self, and set to work to get out some dry clothes for the boy. She then warmed a cup of milk, and invited him to her room.

The boy had long curly hair, big expressive eyes, and

no sign yet of hair on the face. Kiran, after getting him to drink some milk, asked him all about himself.

He told her that his name was Nilkanta, and that he belonged to a theatrical troupe. They were coming to play in a neighbouring villa when the boat had suddenly foundered in the storm. He had no idea what had become of his companions. He was a good swimmer, and had just managed to reach the shore.

The boy stayed with them. His narrow escape from a terrible death made Kiran take a warm interest in him. Sharat thought the boy's appearance at this moment rather a good thing, as his wife would now have something to amuse her, and might be persuaded to stay for some time longer. Her mother-in-law, too, was pleased at the prospect of profiting their Brahmin guest by her kindness. And Nilkanta himself was delighted at his double escape from his master and from the other world, as well as at finding a home in this wealthy family.

But within a short while Sharat and his mother had changed their minds, and were longing for his departure. The boy found a secret pleasure in smoking Sharat's hookah; he would calmly go off in pouring rain with Sharat's best silk umbrella for a stroll in the village, and make friends with all whom he met. Moreover, he had got hold of a mongrel village dog which he petted so much that it came indoors with muddy paws, and left tokens of its visit on Sharat's spotless bed. Then he gathered about him a devoted band of boys of all sorts and sizes, and the result was that not a solitary mangoe in the neighbourhood had a chance of ripening that season.

There is no doubt that Kiran had a hand in spoiling the boy. Sharat often warned her about it, but she would not listen to him. She made a dandy of him with Sharat's cast-off clothes, and gave him new ones too. And because she felt drawn towards him, and also had a curiosity to know about him, she was constantly calling him to her own room. After her bath and midday meal, Kiran would be seated on the bedstead with her betel-leaf box by her side,; and while her maid combed and

dried her hair, Nilkanta would stand in front and recite pieces out of his repertory with appropriate gesture and song, his elf-locks waving wildly. Thus the long afternoon hours passed merrily away. Kiran would often try to persuade Sharat to sit with her as one of the audience, but Sharat, who had taken a cordial dislike to the boy, refused, nor could Nilkanta do his part half so well when Sharat was there. His mother would sometimes be lured by the hope of hearing sacred names in the recitation; but the love of her midday sleep speedily overcame devotion, and she lay lapped in dreams.

The boy often had his ears boxed and pulled by Sharat, but as this was nothing to what he had been used to as a member of the troupe, he did not mind it in the least. In his short experience of the world he had come to the conclusion that, as the earth consisted of land and water, so human life was made up of eatings and beatings and that the beatings largely predominated.

It was hard to tell Nilkanta's age. If it were fourteen or fifteen, then his face was too old for his years; if seventeen or eighteen, then it was too young. He was either a man too early or a boy too late. The fact was that, joining the theatrical band when very young, he had played the parts of Radhika, Damayanti, Sita, and Bidya's companion. A thoughtful Providence so arranged things that he grew to the exact stature that his manager required, and then growth ceased. Since every one saw how small he was, and he himself felt small, he did not receive due respect for his years. These causes, natural and artificial, combined to make him sometimes seem immature for seventeen years, and at other times a lad of fourteen but far too knowing for seventeen. And as no sign of hair appeared on his face, the confusion became greater. Either because he smoked or because he used language beyond his years, his lips puckered into lines that showed him to be old and hard; but innocence and youth shone in his large eyes. I fancy that his heart remained young, but the hot glare of publicity had been a forcing-house that had prematurely ripened his appearance.

In the quiet shelter of Sharat's house and garden at Chandernagore, Nature had leisure to work her way unimpeded. He had lingered in a kind of unnatural youth, but now he silently and swiftly passed beyond that stage. His seventeen or eighteen years became apparent. No one observed the change, and its first sign was that when Kiran treated him like a boy, he felt ashamed. When the gay Kiran one day proposed that he should play the part of lady's companion, the idea of woman's dress hurt him, though he could not say why. So now, when she called for him to act over again his old characters, he disappeared. It never occurred to him that he was even now not much more than a lad-of-all-work in a strolling company. He even made up his mind to pick up a little education from Sharat's factor. But, because Nilkanta was the pet of his master's wife, the factor could not endure the sight of him. Also, his restless training made it impossible for him to keep his mind engaged for long ; presently, the alphabet seemed to dance a misty dance before his eyes. He would, however, sit for hours with an open book on his lap, leaning against a *champak* bush beside the Ganges. The waves sighed below him, boats floated past him, birds flitted and twittered restlessly above him. What thoughts passed through his mind as he looked down on that book he alone knew, if indeed he did know. He never advanced from one word to another, but the glorious thought that he was actually reading a book filled his soul with exultation. Whenever a boat went by, he lifted his book and pretended to be reading hard, shouting at the top of his voice. But his energy subsided as soon as the audience was gone.

Formerly he sang his songs automatically, but now their tunes stirred in his mind. Their words were of little import, and full of trifling alliteration. Even the little meaning they had was beyond his comprehension ; yet when he sang—

Twice-born bird ! ah ! wherefore stirred

To wrong our royal lady ?

Goose, ah ! say why wilt thou slay

Her in forest shady ?

then he left as if transported to another world, and to far other folk. This familiar earth and his own poor life became music, and he was transformed. That tale of goose and king's daughter flung upon the mirror of his mind a picture of surpassing beauty. It is impossible to say what he imagined himself to be, but the destitute little slave of the theatrical troupe faded from his memory.

When with evening the child of want lies down, dirty and hungry, in his squalid home, and hears of prince and princess and fabled gold, then in the dark hovel with its dim flickering candle, his mind springs free from its bonds of poverty and misery, and walks in fresh beauty and glowing raiment, strong beyond all fear of frustration, into that fairy realm where all is possible.

Even so, this drudge of wandering players fashioned himself and his world anew, as he moved in spirit amid his songs. The lapping water, rustling leaves, and calling birds; the goddess who had given shelter to him, the helpless, the God-forsaken; her gracious, lovely face, her exquisite arms with their shining bangles, her rosy feet as soft as flower-petals; all these by some magic became one with the music of his song. When the singing ended, the mirage faded, and Nilkanta of the stage appeared again, with his wild elf-locks. Fresh from the complaints of his neighbour, the owner of the despoiled mango-orchard, Sharat would come and box his ears and cuff him. The boy Nilkanta, the misleader of adoring youths, went forth once more, to make ever new mischief by land and water and in the branches that are above the earth.

Shortly after the advent of Nilkanta, Sharat's younger brother, Satish, came to spend his college vacation with them. Kiran was greatly pleased at finding a fresh occupation. She and Satish were of the same age, and the time passed pleasantly in games and quarrels and reconciliations and laughter, and even tears. Suddenly she would clasp him over the eyes, from behind, with vermilion-stained hands, she would write 'monkey' on his back, and sometimes bolt the door on him from

the outside amidst peals of laughter. Satish in his turn did not take things lying down ; he would take her keys and rings, he would put pepper among her betel ; he would tie her to the bed when she was not looking.

Meanwhile, heaven only knows what possessed poor Nilkanta. He was suddenly filled with a bitterness which he must avenge on somebody or something. He thrashed his devoted boy-followers for no fault, and sent them away crying. He would kick his pet mongrel till it made the skies resound with its yelping. When he went out for a walk, he would litter his path with twigs and leaves beaten from the roadside shrubs with his cane.

Kiran liked to see people enjoying good fare. Nilkanta had an immense capacity for eating, and never refused a good thing, however often it was offered. So Kiran liked to send for him to have his meals in her presence, and ply him with delicacies, happy in the bliss of seeing this Brahmin boy eat to satiety. After Satish's arrival she had much less spare time on her hands and was seldom present when Nilkanta's meals were served. Formerly her absence made no difference to the boy's appetite, and he would not rise till he had drained his cup of milk, and rinsed it thoroughly with water.

But now, if Kiran was not present to ask him to try this and that, he was miserable, and nothing tasted right. He would get up without eating much, and say to the serving-maid in a choking voice : " I am not hungry." He thought in imagination that the news of his repeated refusal, " I am not hungry," would reach Kiran ; he pictured her concern, and hoped that she would send for him, and press him to eat. But nothing of the sort happened. Kiran never knew, and never sent for him ; and the maid finished whatever he left. He would then put out the lamp in his room, throw himself on his bed in the darkness, burying his head in the pillow in a paroxysm of sobs. What was his grievance ? Against whom ? And from whom did he expect redress ? At last, when none else came, Mother Sleep soothed with her soft caresses the wounded heart of the motherless lad.

•



Nilkanta came to the unshakable conviction that Satish was poisoning Kiran's mind against him. If Kiran was absent-minded, and had not her usual smile, he would jump to the conclusion that some trick of Satish had made her angry with him. He took to praying to the gods, with all the fervours of his hate, to make him at the next rebirth Satish, and Satish him. He had an idea that a Brahmin's wrath could never be vain ; and the more he tried to consume Satish with the fire of his curses the more did his own heart burn within him. And upstairs he would hear Satish laughing and joking with his sister-in-law.

Nilkanta never dared openly to show his enmity to Satish. But he would contrive a hundred petty ways of causing him annoyance. When Satish went for a swim in the river, and left his soap on the steps of the bathing place, on coming back for it he would find that it had disappeared. Once he found his favourite striped tunic floating past him on the water, and thought it had been blown away by the wind.

One day Kiran, desiring to entertain Satish, sent for Nilkanta to recite as usual, but he stood there in gloomy silence. Quite surprised, Kiran asked him what was the matter. But he remained silent. And when again pressed by her to repeat some favourite piece of hers, he answered : " I don't remember," and walked away.

At last the time came for their return home. Everybody was busy packing up. Satish was going with them. But to Nilkanta no one said a word. The question whether he was to go or not seemed not to have occurred to anybody.

The question, as a matter of fact, had been raised by Kiran, who had proposed to take him with them. But her husband and his mother and brother had all objected so strenuously that she had let the matter drop. A couple of days before they were to start, she sent for the boy and with kind words advised him to go back to his own home.

So many days had he felt neglected that this touch of kindness was too much for him ; he burst into tears. Kiran's eyes were also brimming over. She was filled with remorse at the thought that she had created a tie of affection, which could not be permanent.

But Satish was much annoyed at the blubbering of this overgrown boy. " Why does the fool stand there howling instead of speaking ?" said he. When Kiran scolded him for an unfeeling creature, he replied : " Sister mine, you do not understand. You are too good and trustful. This fellow turns up from the Lord knows where, and is treated like a king. Naturally the tiger has no wish to become a mouse again. And he has evidently discovered that there is nothing like a tear or two to soften your heart."

Nilkanta hurriedly left them. He felt he would like to be a knife to cut Satish to pieces ; a needle to pierce him through and through ; a fire to burn him to ashes. But Satish was not even scarred. It was only his own heart that bled and bled.

Satish had brought with him from Calcutta a beautiful inkstand. The inkpot was set in a mother-of-pearl boat drawn by a German-silver goose supporting a penholder. It was a great favourite of his, and he cleaned it carefully every day with an old silk handkerchief. Kiran would laugh and, tapping the silver bird's beak, would say :—

Twice-born bird ! ah ! wherefore stirred  
To wrong our royal lady ?  
and the usual war of words would break out between her and her brother-in-law.

The day before they were to start, the inkstand was missing, and could nowhere be found. Kiran smiled, and said : " Brother-in-law, your goose has flown off to look for your Damayanti."

But Satish was in a great rage. He was certain that Nilkanta had stolen it, for several people said they had seen him prowling about the room the night before.

He had the accused brought before him. Kiran also was there. "You have stolen my inkstand, you thief," he blurted out. "Bring it back at once." Nilkanta had always taken punishment from Sharat, deserved or undeserved, with perfect equanimity. But, when he was called a thief in Kiran's presence, his eyes blazed with a fierce anger, his breast swelled, and his throat choked. If Satish had said another word he would have flown at him like a wild cat, and used his nails like claws.

Kiran was greatly distressed at the scene, and taking the boy into another room said in her sweet, kind way : "Nilu, if you really have taken that inkstand give it to me quietly, and I shall see that no one says another word to you about it." Big tears coursed down the boy's cheeks, till at last he hid his face in his hands, and wept bitterly. Kiran came back from the room and said : "I am sure Nilkanta has not taken the ink-stand." Sharat and Satish were equally positive that no other than Nilkanta could have done it.

But Kiran said determinedly : "Never."

Sharat wanted to cross-examine the boy, but his wife refused to allow it.

Then Satish suggested that his room and box should be searched. And Kiran said : "If you dare do such a thing, I will never, never forgive you. You shall not spy on the poor innocent boy." And as she spoke, her wonderful eyes filled with tears. That settled the matter, and effectively prevented their pestering Nilkanta any further.

Kiran's heart overflowed with pity at this attempted outrage on a homeless lad. She got two new suits of clothes and a pair of shoes, and, with these and a banknote in her hand, she quietly went into Nilkanta's room in the evening. She intended to put these parting presents into his box as a surprise. The box itself had been her gift.

From her bunch of keys she selected one that fitted, and noiselessly opened the box. It was so jumbled up

with odds and ends that the new clothes would not go in. So she thought she had better take everything out and pack the box for him. At first knives, tops, kite-flying reels, bamboo twigs, polished shells for peeling green mangoes, bottoms of broken tumblers and such like things dear to a boy's heart were discovered. Then there came a layer of linen, clean and otherwise. And from under the linen there emerged the missing inkstand, goose and all.

Kiran, with flushed face, sat down helplessly with the ink-stand in her hand, puzzled and wondering.

In the meantime, Nilkanta had come into the room from behind without Kiran knowing it. He had seen the whole thing, and thought that Kiran had come like a thief to catch him in his thieving, and that his deed was discovered. How could he ever hope to convince her that he was not a thief and that only revenge had prompted him to take the ink-stand, which he meant to throw into the river at the first chance? In a weak moment he had put it in his box instead. 'He was not a thief,' his heart cried out, 'not a thief.' Then what was he? What could he say? He had stolen, and yet he was not a thief! He could never explain to Kiran how grievously wrong she was in taking him for a thief: how could he bear the thought that she had tried to spy on him?

At last Kiran with a deep sigh replaced the ink-stand in the box, and, as if she were the thief herself, covered it up with the linen and the trinkets as they were before; and at the top she placed the presents together with the banknote which she had brought for him.

The next day the boy was nowhere to be found. The villagers had not seen him; the police could discover no trace of him. Said Sharat: "Now, as a matter of curiosity, let us have a look at his box." But Kiran was obstinate in her refusal to allow that to be done.

She had the box brought up to her own room; and taking out the ink-stand alone, threw it into the river.

The whole family went home. In a day the garden became desolate. And only Nilkanta's starving mongrel remained prowling along the river bank, whining and whining as if its heart would break.

*(Translated from the Bengali)*

# THE DROUGHT

*Sarat Chandra Chatterjee*

The village was called Kashipur. It was a small village, but its *Zamindar* was smaller still. Yet his tenants dared not stand up to him. He was so ruthless.

It was the birthday of his youngest son. It was noon. Tarkaratna, the priest, was on his way home from the landlord's house, where he had been offering prayers. It was nearing the end of May, but not a patch of cloud could be seen in the sky. The rainless firmament poured fire.

At the end of the field, beside the road, there stood the house of Gafur, the weaver. Now that the mud walls were in ruins, the courtyard touched the public highway, and the inner privacy was thrown on the mercy of the passers-by.

"Hey! Gafur! Is anybody in?" called out Tarkaratna, standing in the shade of a tree by the roadside.

"What do you want? Father is down with fever," answered Gafur's little daughter, aged ten, appearing at the door.

"Fever! Call the scoundrel!"

The noise brought Gafur out, shivering with fever. A bull was tied to the old acacia that leaned against the broken wall.

"What do I see there?" demanded Tarkaratna, indicating the bull. "Do you realise that this is a Hindu village and the landlord himself a Brahmin?" His face was crimson with indignation and the heat of the sun. It was to be expected that his words should be hot and harsh. But Gafur simply looked at him, unable to follow the import of his words.

"Well," said Tarkaratna, "I saw it tied there in the morning and it's still there. If the bull dies, your master

will flay you alive ! He is no ordinary Brahmin !”

“What shall I do, Father ? I’m helpless. I have had fever for the last few days. I can’t take him out to graze. I feel so ill.”

“Can’t you let him graze by himself ?”

“Where shall I let him go, Father ? People haven’t threshed all their paddy yet. It’s still lying in the fields. The straw hasn’t been gathered. Everything is burnt to cinders—there isn’t a blade of grass anywhere. How can I let him loose, Father ? He might start poking his nose into somebody’s paddy or eating somebody’s straw.”

Tarkaratna softened a little. “But you can at least tie him in the shade somewhere and give him a bundle of straw or two to munch. Hasn’t you daughter cooked rice ? Why not give him a tub of boiled rice water ? Let him drink it.”

Gafur made no reply. He looked helplessly at Tarkaratna, and a deep sigh escaped him.

“I see ; you haven’t even got that much ? What have you done with your share of straw ? I suppose you have gone and sold it to satisfy your belly ? Not saved even one bundle for the bull ! How callous you are !”

At this cruel accusation Gafur seemed to lose the power of speech. “This year I was to have received my share of straw,” said Gafur slowly after a moment’s hesitation, “but the master kept it all on account of my last year’s rent. ‘Sir, you are our lord and master,’ I implored, falling at his feet. ‘Where am I to go if I leave your domain ? Let me have at least a little straw. There’s no straw on my roof, and we have only one hut in which we two—father and daughter—live. We’ll patch the roof with palm leaves and manage this rainy weather, somehow, but what will happen to our Mahesh without food ?’”

“Indeed ! So you’re fond enough of the bull to call him Mahesh ! This is a joke.”

But his sarcasm did not reach Gafur. “But the master took no pity on me,” he went on. “He gave me paddy to last only two months. My share of straw was

added to his own stock—Mahesh didn't have even a wisp of it."

"Well, don't you owe him money?" said Tarkaratna, unmoved. "Why shouldn't you have to pay? Do you expect the landlord to support you?"

"But what am I to pay him with? We till four *bighas* of land for him, but the paddy has dried up in the fields during the droughts in the last two years. My daughter and I have not even enough to eat. Look at the hut! When it rains, I spend the night with my daughter huddled in one corner—we can't even stretch our legs. Look at Mahesh! You can count his ribs. Do lend me a bit of hay for him so that he can have something to eat for a day or two." And Gafur sank down on the ground at the Brahmin's feet.

"No, no! Move aside! Let me go home, it's getting late." Tarkaratna made a movement as though to depart, smiling. "Good God! He seems to brandish his horns at me! Will he hurt?" he cried out with fright and anger, stepping hurriedly back from the bull.

Gafur staggered to his feet. "He wants to eat a handful," he said, indicating the wet bundle of rice and fruit in Tarkaratna's hand.

"Wants to eat? Indeed! Like master, like animal. Hasn't even a bit of straw to eat and must have rice and fruit. Take him away and tie him somewhere else! What horns! He will gore somebody to death one of these days." Edging a little, the priest made a quick exit.

Looking away from him, Gafur silently watched Mahesh, whose two deep, brown eyes were full of pain and hunger. "Didn't even give a handful," he muttered, patting the bull's neck and back. "You are my son, Mahesh," he whispered to him. "You have grown old and served us for eight years. I can't even give you enough to eat—but you know how much I love you, don't you?"

Mahesh only stretched out his neck and closed his eyes with pleasure.

"Tell me," went on Gafur, "how can I keep you



alive in this dreadful year? If I let you loose, you will start eating other people's paddy or munching their banana leaves. What can I do with you? You have no strength left in your body—nobody wants you. They ask me to sell you at the cattle market....” At the very idea his eyes filled with tears again. Wiping his tears on the back of his hand and looking this way and that, he fetched a tiny bunch of discoloured old straw from behind the hut. “Eat it quickly, my child, otherwise....” he said softly, placing it before Mahesh.

“Father....”

“What is it?”

“Come and eat,” answered Gafur’s daughter, looking out of the door. “Why, have you again given Mahesh straw from the roof?”

He had feared as much. “It’s old straw—it was rotting away,” he answered, ashamed.

“I heard you pulling it, father.”

“No, darling, it wasn’t exactly....”

“But you know, father, the wall will crumble..”

Gafur was silent. He had nothing left but this hut. Who knew better than he that unless he was careful it would not last another rainy season. And yet what good was it really?

“Wash your hands and come and eat. I have served your food,” said the little girl.

“Give me the rice water; let me feed him.”

“There is none, father—it has dried up in the pot.”

Nearly a week had passed. Gafur was sitting in the yard, sick of body and anxious. Mahesh had not returned since the day before.

He himself was helpless. Amina had been looking for the bull everywhere from early morning. The evening shadows were already falling when she came home. “Have you heard, father? Manik Ghose has sent Mahesh to the police pen,” she said.

“Nonsense!”

“Yes, father, it’s true. His servant said to me, ‘Tell your father to look for the bull at Dariapur....’”

"What did he do?"

"He entered their garden, father."

Gafur made no answer.

"At the end of three days, they say, the police will sell him at the cattle market."

"Let them," answered Gafur.

Amina did not know what the "cattle market" meant. She had often noticed her father grow restless whenever it was mentioned in connection with Mahesh, but to-day he went out without saying another word.

Under the cover of night, Gafur secretly came round to Banshi's shop.

"Uncle, you'll have to lend me a rupee," said he, putting down a brass plate under the seat. Banshi was well acquainted with this object. In the last two years he had lent a rupee at least five times on this security. He made no objection to-day either.

The next morning Mahesh was seen at his usual place again. An elderly Mohammedan was examining him with very sharp eyes. Not far away, on one side, Gafur sat on the ground, all hunched up. The examination over, the old man untied a ten-rupee note from a corner of his shawl, and, smoothing it again and again, said: "Here, take this. I shan't take anything off. I'm paying the full price."

Stretching his hand, Gafur took the money, but remained silent. As the two men who came with the old man were about to take the rope round the animal's neck, he suddenly stood bolt upright. "Don't touch that rope, I tell you. Be careful, I warn you!" he cried out hoarsely.

They were taken aback. "Why?" asked the old man in surprise.

"There's no why to it. He's my property—I shall not sell him; it's my pleasure," he answered in the same tone, and threw the note away.

"But you accepted the deposit yesterday," all three said in a chorus.

"Take this back," he answered, flinging the two rupees across to them.

Gafur begged for rice water from the neighbours and fed Mahesh. Patting him on the head and horns, he whispered vague sounds of endearment to him.

It was about the middle of June. Nobody who has not looked at an Indian summer sky will realise how terrible, how un-renting, the heat can be. Not a trace of mercy anywhere! To-day even the thought that some day this aspect of the sky will change, that it will become overcast with soft, vapour-laden clouds is impossible. It seemed as though the whole blazing sky will go on burning day after day endlessly, to the end of time.

Gafur returned home at noon. He was not used to working as a hired labourer, and it was only four or five days since his temperature had gone down. His body was still weak and tired. He had gone out to seek work, but in vain. He had had no success. Hungry, thirsty, tired, everything was dark before his eyes. "Is the food ready, Amina dear?" he called out from the courtyard.

Without answering, his daughter quietly came out and stood leaning against the wall.

"Is the food ready?" Gafur repeated without receiving an answer.

"What do you say? No? Why?"

"There's no rice, father."

"No rice? Why didn't you tell me in the morning?"

"Why, I told you last night."

"I told you last night," mimicked Gafur. "How am I to remember what you told me last night?" His anger grew more and more violent at the sound of his own voice. "Of course, there's no rice!" he growled, with his face more distorted than ever. "What does it matter to you whether your father eats or not? But the young lady must have her three meals! In the future I shall lock up the rice when I go out. Give me

some water to drink—I'm dying of thirst....So you haven't any water, either!"

Amina remained standing with bowed head as before. Realising that there was not even a drop of water in the house, he lost all self-control. Rushing at her, he slapped her face noisily. "Wretched girl! What do you do all day? So many people die—why don't you?"

The girl did not utter a word. She took the empty earthen pitcher and went out into the afternoon sun, quietly wiping her silent tears.

The moment she was out of sight, her father was overwhelmed with remorse. He alone knew how he had brought up that motherless girl. He knew that this affectionate, dutiful quiet daughter of his was not to blame. They had never had enough to eat even while their little store of rice lasted. It was impossible to eat three times a day. Nor was he unaware of the reason for the absence of water. The two or three tanks in the village had all dried up. The little water that there was still in the private tank of Shibu Babu was not for the public. A few holes had been dug at the bottom of the other tanks, but there was such crowding and jostling for a little water that this chit of a girl could not even approach them. She stood for hours on end and, after much begging, if somebody took pity on her, she returned home with a little water. He knew all this. Perhaps there was no water to-day or nobody had found time to take pity on her. Something of the sort must have happened, he thought, and his own eyes, too, filled with tears.

"Gafur! Are you in?" somebody cried out from the yard. The landlord's messenger had arrived.

"Yes, I'm in. Why?" answered Gafur bitterly.

"Master has sent for you. Come."

"I haven't had any food yet. I will come later," said Gafur.

Such impudence seemed intolerable to the messenger. "It's master's order to drag you to him and give you a good thrashing," he roared, calling the man ugly names.

Gafur lost self-control for the second time. "We are nobody's slave," he replied, returning similar compliments. "We pay rent to live here. I will not go."

But in this world it is not only futile for the small to appeal to authority, it is dangerous as well. Fortunately the tiny voice seldom reaches big ears or who knows what might happen? When Gafur returned home from the landlord's and quietly lay down, his face and eyes were swollen. The chief cause of so much suffering was Mahesh. When Gafur left home that morning, Mahesh broke loose from his tether, and, entering the grounds of the landlord, had eaten up flowers and upset the corn drying in the sun. When finally they tried to catch him, he had hurt the landlord's youngest daughter and had escaped. This was not the first time this had happened, but Gafur was forgiven because he was poor. If he had come round, and, as on other occasions, begged for the landlord's forgiveness, he would probably have been forgiven, but instead he had claimed that he paid rent, and that he was nobody's slave. This was too much for Shibu Babu, the *zamindar*, to swallow. Gafur had borne the beatings and tortures without protest. At home, too, he lay in a corner without a word. Hunger and thirst he had forgotten, but his heart was burning within him like the sun outside. He had kept no count of how time passed.

He was suddenly shaken out of his listlessness by a shriek of a girl. She was prostrate on the ground. The pitcher which she had been carrying tumbled over, and Mahesh was sucking up the water as it flowed on to the earth. Gafur was completely out of his mind. Without waiting another moment he seized his plough-head he had left yesterday for repair, and with both hands struck it violently on the bent head of Mahesh. Once only Mahesh attempted to raise his head, but immediately his starving, lean body sagged to the ground. A few drops of blood

from his ears rolled down. His whole body shook once or twice and then, stretching the fore and hind legs as far as they would reach, Mahesh fell dead.

"What have you done, father? Our Mahesh is dead!" Amina burst out weeping.

Gafur did not move nor answer her. He remained staring without blinking at a pair of motionless, beady, black eyes.

Before two hours were out the tanners living at the end of the village came crowding in and carried off Mahesh on a bamboo pole. Shuddering at the sight of the shining knives in their hands, Gafur closed his eyes but did not speak.

The neighbours informed him that the landlord had sent for Tarkaranta to ask for his advice. How would Gafur pay for the penance which the killing of a sacred animal demanded?"

Gafur made no reply to these remarks, but remained squatting with his chin resting on his knees.

"Amina, dear, come, let's go," said Gafur, rousing his daughter at the dead of night.

She had fallen asleep in the yard. "Where, father?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

"To work at the jute mill at Fulbere," said the father.

The girl looked at him incredulously. Through all his misery he had declined to go to Fulbere. "No religion, no respect, no privacy for womenfolk there," she had often heard him say.

"Hurry up, my child; we have a long way to go," said Gafur.

Amina was going to collect the drinking bowl and her father's brass plate. "Leave them alone, darling. They'll pay for the penance for Mahesh," said Gafur.

In the dead of night Gafur set out, holding his daughter by the hand. He had nobody to call his own in the village. He had nothing to say to anybody. Crossing the yard, when he reached the acacia, he stopped stock-still and burst out crying loudly. "Allah," he said, raising his face towards the star-spangled black sky,

“punish me as much as you like—Mahesh died with thirst on his lips. Nobody left even the tiniest bit of land for him to feed on. Please never forgive the landlord his sin, who never let him eat the grass nor drink the water you have given.” They set out for the jute mill.

*(Translated from the Bengali by S. Sinha)*

# RESIGNATION

*Prem Chand*

The office clerk is a dumb animal. Frown at a workman and he will frown back, swear at a coolie and he will throw off his load, insult a beggar and he will find a way of making you feel small ; even a donkey will kick up his hind legs if you torment him too long. But not the office clerk. Frown at him, snub him, insult him, hit him, he will bear it all in silence. He has a control over his feelings that even a Yogi cannot acquire after years of penance and self-control. He is a picture of contentment, a paragon of patience, a personification of loyalty, a model of respectfulness. He is a combination of all the virtues. In spite of this, fortune never smiles on him. Even the straw roof of a miserable peasant's hut has its turn of luck. On Diwali night, the night of the Festival of Lamps, it is illuminated. It enjoys a shower of rain and takes pleasure in the sight of changing seasons. But the monotony of a Babu's life is never relieved. There is never a ray of light in his darkness. There is never the light of a smile on his face. Lala Fatch Chand was a member of this dumb species of humanity.

They say that the name affects the character to some extent. Now the name Fatch Chand means "The Moon of Victory," but from our hero's character it would be more appropriate to call him "The Slave of Defeat." He had failed in his office, he had failed in his private life, he was a failure among his friends, there was disappointment and defeat all around him. He had no son, but three daughters, no brothers but two sisters-in-law, and not a penny to fall back on. He was kind and generous by nature, which means that he was taken advantage of by everybody. On top of this his health was always poor. At the age of thirty-two his hair



was like pepper and salt. His eyes were lustreless, his digestion ruined. His face was pale, his cheeks were sunken, his shoulders drooped. There was neither courage in his heart or strength in his blood. He went to his office at nine in the morning and returned at six in the evening. After that he never had the energy to leave the house. He had no idea what was happening in the world outside the four walls of his home and office. His present life and future life, his heaven and hell was his office. He had no interest in religion, none in entertainment, not even in sin. It was years since he had even played a game of cards.

It was winter. The sky was slightly clouded. When Lala Fateh Chand returned from his office at half past five the candles had already been lit. As usual, he lay quietly on a charpoy in the dark room for about twenty minutes, before he could summon enough energy to open his mouth. He was still lying there when there was a noise outside. Someone shouted for him. His young daughter went out to look and reported that it was a peon from the office. At this moment his wife Sharda was scrubbing some utensils with ash before serving her husband's food. She told the girl: "Ask him what is the matter? He is just back from the office. Why do they want him again?"

The messenger replied: "The Sabih wants him. He says it's very important."

Lala Fateh Chand's forty winks were disturbed. He raised his tired head from the charpoy and asked. "Who is it?"

"It's the Chaprasi from the office, said Sharda.

"The Chaprasi? Why, does the Sahib want me?"

"Yes, he says he wants you urgently. What sort of man is this Sahib of yours? He always seems to want you. Hasn't he had enough out of you all day? Tell him you can't come. The worst he can do is to take this wretched job from you. Let him!"

Fateh Chand muttered as if talking to himself: "I had finished everything. What does he want me

for ? It's funny." And then he shouted to the Chaprasi who was still standing outside the house : " I am coming," and got ready to go.

" Have something to eat. Once you start talking to the Chaprasi you'll forget everything else," said Sharda.

She brought him a bowl of lentil porridge. Fateh Chand had got up to go. When he saw this refreshment he sat down again, watched it hungrily for some time and then asked his wife, " Have the children had some ?"

Sharda retorted angrily, as if she had been expecting this question : " Yes, yes ! They have had their share. Now you eat some."

At this moment the youngest daughter appeared from somewhere and stood near by. Sharda looked daggers at her. " What are you doing here ? Go and play outside," she said.

" Don't frighten the child," said Fateh Chand. " Come, Chunni, come and sit here. Have a little of this."

Casting a look of fear at her mother Chunni ran into the street.

Sharda said : " There's not much of it as it is. Not enough for you to start giving it away. If you give it to her the other two will be asking for it as well."

At this moment the Chaprasi again shouted from outside : " Babuji, it's getting late !"

" Why don't you tell him you can't come at this time of night ?" said Sharda.

" How can I when I depend on him for my livelihood ?"

" You're letting him work you to death ! Have you looked at your face in the mirror ? You look as if you'd been ill for six months."

Fateh Chand ate a few spoonfuls of the porridge, quickly drank a glass of water and hurried away. He did not even wait for Sharda to finish a paan for him.

The Chaprasi said on seeing him, " You've taken a long time, Babuji. Now let us hurry. Otherwise Sahib will start swearing as soon as he sees you."

Fateh Chand tried to run for a few paces. Then he

gave it up.

"He can swear if he likes," he said. "I can't run. Is he at his bungalow or at the office?"

The Chaprasi said: "Why should *he* be at the office? Is he a king or is he a clown?"

The Chaprasi was used to walking fast. Babu Fateh Chand on the contrary was used to walking slowly. But how could he confess this? He had a little pride left. He made efforts to keep abreast, but it was no use. He felt a pain in his ribs and he could not breathe easily. His head swayed and his whole body broke into a clammy sweat. Fireflies flitted before his eyes. The Chaprasi warned him bullyingly: "Walk a bit faster, Babuji! You're too slow."

Fateh Chand had difficulty in speaking. "You get along. Tell him I'll be there presently."

And he sat down on a platform at the side of the road. He held his head between his hands and drew deep breaths. When the Chaprasi saw him like this, he said nothing and went on. Fateh Chand was afraid of what this devil might go and tell the Englishman. He got up with an effort and started again. A child could have knocked him down. Somehow he stumbled along and reached the Sahib's bungalow.

The Sahib was walking up and down in the verandah. He looked again and again at the gate and was furious to see nobody coming. When he saw the Chaprasi he shouted: "Where have you been all the time?"

Standing on the steps of the verandah, the Chaprasi replied, "Huzoor, Fateh Chand took so long that I couldn't wait any longer. You can see I have run all the way back."

"What did the Babu say?" said the Sahib in his bad Hindustani.

"He's coming. He took nearly an hour getting out of the house."

In the meantime Fateh Chand entered the spacious compound of the bungalow, came near and salaamed to the Sahib, bowing very low. The Sahib snapped at him: "Why are you so late?"

When Fateh Chand saw the Sahib's expression his blood ran cold.

"Huzoor, I left the office only a short while ago. But as soon as the Chaprasi called I left the house, as quickly as I could."

"You are telling a lie. I've been waiting here for an hour."

"Huzoor, I am not lying. Perhaps it has taken me more than the usual time to walk because I am not feeling very well, but I left the house as soon as the Chaprasi called for me."

The Sahib brandished the cane he was holding. He was obviously drunk. He shouted, "Shut up you swine ! I've been standing here waiting for over an hour. Hold your ears and ask forgiveness."

Fateh Chand controlled himself as if he were swallowing blood. He said : "Huzoor, I worked to-day for more than ten hours in the office—I never...."

"Shut up, you swine ! Hold your ears !"

"I have done nothing wrong."

"Chaprasi, you pull this swine's ears !" bawled the drunken Englishman.

The Chaprasi answered in a low but firm voice : "Huzoor, he is also my superior. How can I pull his ears ?"

"Pull his ears, I say ! If you don't I'll thrash you !"

The Chaprasi replied : "Huzoor, I came to the office to serve, not to be beaten. I, too, have my self-respect. Huzoor can take my job from me. I am prepared to obey all your orders but I cannot lay hands on another's self-respect. I shan't keep this job for ever. I cannot make enemies with the world for its sake."

The Sahib could not control his anger. He rushed at the Chaprasi with his cane. The Chaprasi knew it was no longer safe to wait and took to his heels.

Fateh Chand stood silent, transfixed. When the Sahib could not get at the Chaprasi he came at him. He caught both his ears and shook him. "You swine ! You're insubordinate ! Go and bring the file from the office."

.

Fateh Chand said, nursing his ears, "Which file, sir?"

"Which file....which file.... Are you deaf? I want the file....Do you hear?"

Fateh Chand mustered some courage and asked with some disgust: "Which file do you want?"

He was at a loss. But he did not have the courage to pursue the question. The Sahib was by nature a bad-tempered man, on top of that he was drunk with power, and on top of that he was drunk with whiskey. No one could predict what he would do next. So he started walking quietly towards the office.

"Run!" shouted the Sahib.

"Huzoor, I cannot run," said the clerk.

"You're getting lazy, are you? I'll show you how to run. Run, will you, run." He kicked him from behind.

Fateh Chand was an office clerk, but he was also a human being. If he had had any strength he would not have borne so much indignity from a drunkard. But as it was it was useless to resist. He ran out of the gate and reached the road.

Fateh Chand did not go to the office. The Sahib had not even told him exactly which file he wanted. Perhaps he was too drunk to think it necessary to mention it. He started walking home, slowly, because the pain and anguish of this unwarranted humiliation had put chains on his feet. It is true that the Sahib was much stronger physically, but could he not at least have given him a piece of his mind? Why had he not taken off his shoe and hit him on the face?

But there was really no help for it, he thought. The Englishman could have shot him dead. At the most they would give him a light sentence of a couple of months, or a fine of three or four hundred rupees. But *his* whole family would be ruined. There was no one who would look after his children. Perhaps they would die of starvation in the streets. Oh, why wasn't he a bit

richer ? If he had even a little money to fall back on he would not tolerate this treatment. He wouldn't have minded being killed after he had given a proper lesson to that bully. He wasn't afraid for his own sake. There were no great pleasures in life he would be sorry to leave. Only his wife....his children....

He thought of all sorts of things as he went along. Why had he neglected his health so badly ? He ought always to carry a knife. He ought to have slapped the Sahib on the face. Perhaps the Sahib's khansamas and other servants would have thrashed him till he was unconscious, may be till he was dead. Then it would have got round that someone had really stood up against oppression. After all, he had to die some day, and he wouldn't be able to look after his family then. There would have been some honour in that kind of death. This last thought fired him so much that he turned back and took a few steps towards the bungalow, but then he faltered again.

Very likely the Sahib had left for his club. What was the use of inviting more trouble ? What had already happened was enough.

As soon as he got back home Sharda asked : " Why did he call you ? You are very late."

Lying down on his charpoy Fateh Chand said : " He was drunk ; he abused me, the devil ; he insulted me. The only thing he kept on repeating was, ' Why are you late ? ' He asked the peon to pull my ears."

Sharda answered angrily, " Why didn't you hit him on the face with your shoe ?"

Fateh Chand continued : " The Chaprasi is a good fellow ; he said quite plainly, ' Huzoor, I am not in your service in order to humiliate respectable people.' And then he salaamed him and went away."

" That really was brave of him. Why didn't you give the Englishman a piece of your mind ?"

" But I did. I gave him more than a piece of my mind. He rushed at me with his stick. I took off my shoe, he beat me with his stick, I beat him with my shoe."

Sharda was thrilled. She said : " Really ? His face must have been a sight ! "

" His face looked as if somebody had been over it with a broom. "

" You did well ! If I was there I wouldn't have left him alive. "

" Well, I've given him a beating but things won't be simple now ; I don't know what's coming. I shall lose my job, of course, and may be I shall be put in prison as well. "

" Why should you be put in prison ? Is there no justice in the world ? Why did he abuse you ? He hit you first, didn't he ? "

" Nobody will listen to me. Even the judges will be on his side. "

" Never mind. You'll see now, no English officer will dare to treat his subordinates like that. "

" He might have shot me. "

" Somebody would have seen him. "

Fateh Chand said with a smile : " What would have happened to you then ? "

" God would have looked after us. The biggest thing for a man is to keep his honour ; if you lose your honour, you don't deserve to look after your children. Since you have beaten that devil, I am proud of you. If you had borne the insult silently, I would have hated to look at your face ; maybe I would not have said anything to you, but in my heart I would have lost all respect for you. "

In calm, cool voice Sharda went on : " Now, whatever the consequences are, I shall face them joyfully. Hey, where are you going ? Listen, listen. . . . . "

Like a madman, Fateh Chand ran out of the house. Sharda kept shouting after him, but he did not reply. He was going towards the bungalow ; no longer cringing with fright, but holding his head up with pride. There was iron resolution in his face. He was a changed man. Instead of that weak, lifeless pale office clerk, here was a man, an active, brave, strong human being, walking

with a purpose. He first went to a friend's house and borrowed a good strong stick. Then he went on to the bungalow.

It was nine o'clock. The Sahib was at dinner, but to-day Fateh Chand did not wait for him to finish his meal. As soon as the khansama had finished serving the meal and gone back to kitchen he lifted the curtain and went inside. The room was flooded with electric light. The floor was covered with a carpet, so beautiful, so expensive that Fateh Chand had not seen the like even on the day of his marriage. The Sahib looked at him with furious eyes.

"Get out. Why have you come in without permission?"

Fateh Chand raised his stick and said: "You wanted the file; I have brought the file. Finish your meal and then I'll show it to you. Till then I shall sit here. Have a good meal, maybe it will be your last."

The Sahib was stunned. He looked at Fateh Chand with an expression half of fear and half of anger. He realised that the man was desperate. Physically, he was weak, but it was certain that he had come prepared to return a stone for a brick; no, not a stone, but iron. The Sahib was afraid. It is easy to beat a dog so long as he does not growl; but when he snarls back at you you lose your determination. That was exactly what the Sahib felt. So long as he knew that Fateh Chand would bear abuses and even kicks silently he felt tough, but now that he was in a different mood and was watching every one of his movements like a cat, the Sahib's resolution failed him. He knew that one insulting word would bring a blow from that stick. True, he could dismiss him. True, he could even get him sent to jail; but he knew that he could not escape scandal and trouble. So, like a far-sighted man, he became mild and diplomatic, and said: "My dear man, you seem to be annoyed with me. Why are you annoyed? Have I said anything to upset you?"

"Half an hour ago you pulled my ears and called me a damn fool a hundred times. Can it be that you



have forgotten so soon, Sahib ?”

“I pulled your ears ! You must be joking. Do you think I am mad ?”

“The peon is a witness. And your servants were watching, too.”

“When did I do all this ?”

“Only half an hour ago. You sent for me and then you pulled my ears and kicked me.”

“Really ! The fact is, Babuji, I must confess that I was a bit drunk. The bearer gave me too much whiskey. I don’t remember anything. My God ! Did I do that ?”

“If you had shot me while you were drunk, would I not have died ? If everything is forgivable to a drunkard then just now it is I who am drunk. And my decision is that you shall hold your ears and ask my forgiveness, and swear that you will not treat people again like that. Otherwise, I will teach you a lesson. And don’t you dare to move. The moment you leave your chair, I’ll crack your skull. Now hold your ears.”

The Sahib tried to laugh and said : “Well, Babuji you have a sense of humour, haven’t you ? Well, if I have said something rude to you, please forgive me.”

“Hold your ears,” said Fateh Chand, brandishing his stick.

The Englishman was not willing to go through this humiliating ritual so lightly. He jumped from his chair and tried to snatch the stick from Fateh Chand’s hands, but Fateh Chand was prepared for this. Before the Sahib had left the table, he gave him one full blow on his bare head. The Sahib’s skull started singing. For a minute he held his head in both hands and then said : “I shall dismiss you.”

“I don’t care. But to-day I shan’t leave until you hold your ears and swear that you won’t behave towards people as you behaved to me. And if you don’t do it straight away the second blow is coming.” So saying he lifted the stick high.

The Sahib had not yet forgotten the first blow. He

immediately put his hands on his ears and said : " There ! Are you satisfied now ? "

" You won't swear at people any more ? "

" No. "

" If you ever do so, remember that I shan't be far away. "

" I'll never swear at anybody, " said the Sahib in his bad Hindustani.

" Good. And now I shall leave you. From to-day I am no longer your clerk. I shall send in my written resignation to-morrow, explaining that because of your bad manners I am not willing to serve under you. "

" But why resign ? I won't dismiss you. "

" I don't want to serve under an ill-mannered bully like you any longer. That is why. "

And having said this Fateh Chand left the room and with an easy mind started walking back home. He had a sense of true victory and personal freedom. Never in his life had he experienced such happiness.

*(Translated from the Hindustani by D. Anand)*



# JAVNI

*Raja Rao*

I had just arrived. My sister sat by me, talking about a thousand things—about my health, my studies, my future, about Mysore, about my younger sister and so on. I lay on the mat sipping hot coffee, which seemed like nectar after a ten mile cycle ride on one of those bare and dusty roads of Malkad. Drowsily, I listened to her, feeling strange comfort and freedom after nine hectic months in the city. When I had finished my coffee, I asked sister to bring me another cup, not only because I wanted more of that invigorating drink, but because I really felt like being alone. While my sister went to get the coffee, I lay on the mat flat on my face, my hands stretched by my side. It seemed to me as though I were being carried away by a flood of some sort, caressing, feathery and quiet. I fell asleep.

Suddenly, as if in a dream, I heard a door behind me creaking. But I did not move. The door did not open fully and somebody seemed to be standing on the threshold afraid to come in. "Perhaps a neighbour," I said to myself vaguely, and in my drowsiness I muttered something, stretched out my hands, kicked my feet against the floor and slowly moved my head from one side to the other. The door creaked a little again and the visitor seemed to recede. "Gone!" I said to myself, feeling a little sorry that I had sent a neighbour away. Outside the carts rumbled and some cawing crows circled over the roof. A few sunbeams stealing through the tiles fell upon my back. I felt happy.

Meanwhile my sister came back with the coffee, "Ramu," she whispered, standing by me, "Ramu, my child, are you awake or asleep?"

"Awake," I said, turning my head towards the door

which creaked as she shut it.

"Sita," I whispered, "there was somebody at the door."

"When?" she demanded loudly.

"Now! Only a moment ago."

She went to the door, and, opening it, looked towards the street. After a while she smiled affectionately and called: "Javni! You monkey! Why don't you come in? Who do you think is here, Javni? My brother—my brother," She smiled broadly and a few tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Really, Mother!" said a timid voice. "Really! I wanted to come in; but seeing Ramappa fast asleep I thought I'd better wait out here." She spoke peasant Kanarese, drawling the vowels interminably.

"So," I said to myself, "she already knows my name."

"Come in!" commanded my sister.

Javni slowly approached the threshold, but still stood outside as if I were a saint or the holy elephant.

"Don't be shy; come in," commanded my sister again.

Javni entered and, walking reverently as if in a temple, went and sat by a sack of rice.

My sister sat by me, proud and affectionate. I was everything to her—her strength and hope. She touched my head and said: "Ramu, Javni is our new servant."

I turned towards Javni. She seemed to turn away and hide her face. Her hair was growing white, her breasts had fallen, and her bare, broad forehead showed pain and widowhood. "Come near, Javni," I said affectionately.

"No, Ramappa," she whispered.

"Come along," I insisted. She came forward a few steps and sat by the pillar.

"Oh! Come nearer, Javni, and see what a handsome brother I have," cried Sita.

No, I was not flattered. Only, my big, taplike nose, and my thick under-lip seemed more monstrous than ever. Javni crawled along the floor and came a few

steps nearer.

"Oh! Come nearer, you monkey," cried my sister again. Javni advanced a few feet more and, turning her face towards the floor, sat like a bride beside a bridegroom.

"He looks a prince," exclaimed my sister.

"A god!" mumbled Javni. I laughed and drank my coffee.

"The whole town is mad about him," whispered Javni.

"How do you know?" asked Sita.

"How! I have been standing at the market-place the whole afternoon, to see when Ramappa would come. You told me he looked like a prince. You said he rode a bicycle. And, when I saw him come by the *pipal* tree where the fisherman Kodi hanged himself the other day I ran towards the town, and I saw how people gazed and gazed at him. And they asked me who he was. Of course I replied 'the Revenue Inspector's brother-in-law,' 'How handsome he is!' said fat Nanjunda of the cocoa nut-shop.' 'How like a prince he is!' said the concubine Chowdy. 'Oh, a very god!' said my neighbour, barber Venka's wife Kenchi."

"Well, Ramu, so you see, the whole of Malkad is dazzled with your beauty," interrupted my sister. "Take care, my child. They say, in this town, they practice magic, and I have heard how many a good-looking boy has been killed by jealousy." I laughed.

"Don't laugh, Ramappa. With these very eyes, I can swear to you, with these very two eyes, I have seen the ghosts of more than a hundred young men and women—all killed by magic, by magic, Ramappa," assured Javni, for the first time looking towards me. "My learned Ramappa, Ramappa, never go out after sunset, for there are spirits of all sorts walking in the dark; and especially never go by the canal after the cows have come home. It is a haunted place, Ramappa."

"How do you know it?" I asked, curious.

"How? With these very eyes, I have seen, Ramappa, with these very eyes. The potter's wife Rangi was

unhappy. Poor thing! Poor thing! And one night she was so sad, that she went and jumped into the canal. The other day, when I was coming home in the deadly dark with my little lamb, whom should I see but Rangi—Rangi in a white, borderless *sari*, her hair all floating. She stood in front of me. I shivered and wept. She ran and stood by a tree, yelling in a strange voice. 'Away! Away!' I cried. Then suddenly I saw her standing on the bridge, and she jumped into the canal, moaning: 'My girl is gone, my child is gone, and I am gone too!' " My sister trembled. She had a horror of devils.

"Why don't you shut up, you donkey's widow, and stop pouring out all your holy knowledge."

"Pardon me, Mother, pardon me," she begged.

"I have pardoned you again and again, and yet it is always the same old story. Always the same *Ramayana* Why don't you fall into the canal like Rangi and turn into a devil"! My sister was furious. Javni smiled awkwardly and timidly hid her face between her knees.

"How handsome your brother is!" she murmured ecstatically, after a moment.

"Did I not say he was like a prince. Who knows what incarnation of a god he may be? Who knows?" my sister murmured patting me proudly.

"Without Javni," began my sister after a moment's silence, "I could never have lived in this place."

"And without you, I could never have lived either, Mother!" Her voice was so rich and calm that she seemed to sing.

"In this blessed place everything is so difficult," Sita complained. "He," she added referring to her husband, "is always busy with collections. The villages are few but situated at great distances from one another. Sometimes he goes away for more than a week, and I should have died of fright had not Javni been with me. And," she added, a little sadly, "Javni understands my fears and my beliefs.... Men, Ramu, can never understand us...."

"Why," I asked.

"Why? I cannot say. You are too practical and irreligious. To us everything is mysterious. Our gods are not your gods, your gods not our gods. It is simple enough." She seemed sadder still.

"But I have always tried to understand you," I protested.

"Of course! Of course!" exclaimed my sister rapturously, and tears—ever ready—trickled down her cheeks.

"Mother," muttered Javni, trembling, "Mother, will you permit me to say one thing?" She seemed to plead.

"Yes," answered my sister indifferently.

"Ramappa, your sister loves you," blubbered Javni wiping away her tears. "She loves you as though you were her own child. Oh! I wish I had seen her two children! They must have been angels! Very like angels!... But Ramappa, what I wanted to say was this. Your sister loves you, talks of you all the time, and says: 'If my brother did not live, I should have died long ago,' and," here she hesitated, but continued gazing at my sister, for fear she would be reprimanded. "and whenever we go to the temple, she says: 'Keep my brother happy and give him great long life and great learning,' Only the other day..."

"Be quiet!" my sister shouted, fearing her secrets might be revealed.

"How long have you been with Sita?" I asked Javni, trying to change the subject.

"How long? How do I know? But let me see, the harvest was over and we were husking the grain, when they came."

"How did you find her?" I said, turning to my sister.

"Why Ramappa," cried Javni, proud for the first time. "There is nobody who can work for a Revenue Inspector's family as I. You can go and ask anybody in the town, even a pariah, and he will tell you, 'Javni is good as a cow,' and he will also add that there is no one who can serve a Revenue Inspector's family as Javni—



as I." She beat her breasts with satisfaction.

"So it is always a Revenue Inspector's family you serve," I said smiling.

"Of course," she cried, proudly, her hands folded upon her knees. "Of course!"

"Then how many Revenue Inspectors have you served?" I asked.

"How many? Now let me see." Here she counted upon her fingers, one by one, remembering them by how many children they had, what sort of wives they had, their caste, their native place, or even how good they had been in giving her two old saris, a four *anna* tip, or a measure of rice.

"Javni," I said, trying to be a little humourous, "Suppose I come here some day, say after ten, fifteen or twenty years, and I am not a Revenue Inspector, and I ask you to serve me. Will you or will you not?"

She looked perplexed, laughed, and turned towards my sister for help.

"Answer him!" commanded my sister affectionately.

"But Ramappa," cried out Javni, full of happiness, as though she had discovered a solution, to the question, "you cannot but be a big man like our master, the Revenue Inspector. With your learning and your good looks, you cannot be anything else. And when you come here, of course, I will be your servant."

"But if I am not a Revenue Inspector?" I insisted.

"You must be—you must be!" she cried, as if I were insulting myself.

"All right! I shall be a Revenue Inspector in order to have you," I joked.

"As if it were not enough that I should work myself to death in being one," added my brother-in-law, as he entered through the back door dust-covered and breathless.

Javni got up and ran away as though in holy fear. It was the Master!

"She is a sweet soul," I said to my sister.

"Almost a mother!" she added, smiling gratefully.

In the byre Javni was talking to the calf.

My brother-in-law was out touring two or three days in the week, and on these days Javni usually came to sleep in our house, for my sister had a terror of being alone. Since it had become a habit, Javni came as usual even when I was there. One evening, I cannot remember why, we had dined early, and, unrolling our beds, we lay down before evening had really fallen. Javni came, peeped from the window, and called in a whisper, "Mother, Motler."

"Come in, you monkey!" answered my sister.

Javni opened the door and stepped in. She carried a sheet in her hands. Throwing it on the floor, she went straight into the byre where her food was usually kept. I could never bear that, and time and again I had quarrelled with my sister about it. But she would not argue about it. "They are of the lower class, you cannot ask them to sit and eat with you," she would say.

"Of course!" I said. "After all, why not? Are they not like us, like any of us? Only the other day you said you loved her as if she were your elder sister or mother."

"Yes!" she replied angrily. "But affection does not ask you to be irreligious."

"And what, pray, is being *irreligious*?" I continued, furious.

"Irreligious! Irreligious! Well, eating with a woman of a lower caste is irreligious. And, Ramu," she cried desperately, "I have had enough of quarrelling all the time. In the name of the mother who bore us, can't you leave me alone?" And she began to cry.

"You are inhuman!" I spat, disgusted.

"Go and show your humanity!" she grumbled, and hiding her face beneath the blankets, she wept harder.

I was really too much ashamed and too angry to stay in bed. I got up and went into the byre. Javni sat in the dark, swallowing mouthfuls of rice, slowly, like a cow chewing the cud. She thought I had come to

go into the garden, but I stood beside her, leaning against the wall. She stopped eating and seemed greatly embarrassed.

"Javni," I said tenderly.

"Ramappa," she answered, confused.

"Why not light a lantern when you eat, Javni?"

"What use!" she replied, and continued to munch the grain.

"But you cannot see what you are eating!" I explained.

"I cannot. But there is no necessity to see what you eat." She laughed as though amused.

"But you must!" I was angry.

"No, Ramappa. I know where my rice is, and I can feel where the pickle is, and that is enough!"

Just at that moment the cow threw a heapful of dung which splashed across the cobbled floor.

"Suppose you come with me into the hall," I cried. I knew I could never convince her.

"No, Ramappa. I am quite well here. I do not want to dirty the floor of the hall."

"If it is dirty, I will clean it," I shouted, exasperated.

She was silent. In the darkness I saw her shadow near me thrown by the faint starlight that came from the garden door. In the corner the cow was breathing hard, and the calf was nibbling at wisps of hay. It was a terrible moment. The whole misery of the world seemed to be weighing all about and above me. And yet—and yet—one seemed to laugh at all the suffering.

"Javni," I said to her softly, "do you eat at home like this?"

"Yes, Ramappa," Her tone was sad.

"And why?"

"The oil is too expensive, Ramappa."

"But surely you can afford that," I continued.

"No, Ramappa. It costs an *anna* a bottle, and that lasts only a week."

"But an *anna* is nothing," I said.

"Nothing! Nothing!" She seemed frightened.

"Why, my learned Ramappa, it is what I earn in two

days."

"In two days!" I was much too surprised to say anything.

"Yes, Ramappa. I earn rupee a month." She seemed content.

I heard an owl hoot somewhere, and far, far away, somewhere too far and too distant for my rude ear to hear, the world wept in its silent suffering.

Javni sat and ate. The mechanical mastication of the rice seemed to represent her, her life—her whole existence.

"Javni," I said breaking the silence, "what do you do with the rupee?"

"I never take it," she answered, laughing.

"Why don't you take it, Javni?"

"Mother keeps it for me. Now and again she says I work well and adds an *anna* or two to my funds, and one day I shall have enough to buy a *sari*." She seemed happy.

"And the rest?" I asked.

"The rest? Why, I'll buy something for my brother's child."

"Is your brother poor, Javni?"

"No. But, Ramappa, I love the child," she said tenderly.

"Suppose I asked you to give it to me?" I laughed, for I could not weep.

"Oh, you will never ask me, Ramappa, never. But if you should, I would give it to you." She laughed too, content and amused.

"You are wonderful!" I murmured.

"At your feet, Ramappa!"

She had finished eating, and she went into the bathroom to wash her hands. I walked out into the garden and stood looking at the sparkling heavens. There was companionship in their shining. The small and the great clustered together in the heart of the quiet blue. God, they know caste?....Far away a cartman chanted forth:

The night is dark,  
Come to me, mother,  
The night is quiet ;  
Come to me, friend.

The winds sighed.

On the nights Javni came to sleep with us, we usually gossiped a great deal about village affairs. Javni had always news to tell us. One day it would be about the wife of Postman Subba who had run away with the Mohammedan of the mangoe-shop. Another day it would be about the miraculous cure of Sata Venkanna's wife Kanchi, during her recent pilgrimage to the Bilgiri temple. My sister always took an interest in these things, and Javni made it a point to find out everything about everybody, and she gossiped the whole evening till we both fell asleep. My sister usually lay by the window, I near the door, and Javni at our feet. She slept on a bare wattle-mat, with a cotton sheet for cover, and she never seemed to suffer from the cold of the rainy evenings. On one of these nights when we lay gossiping, I pleaded with Javni to tell us a little about her own life. At first she was shy and hesitant ; but when my sister urged her, and I had long been pleading, she accepted, still rather unwillingly. I was all ears, but my sister was snoring away after a while.

Javni was born in the neighbouring village of Kotéhalli, where her father cultivated the fields in winter and washed clothes in summer. Her mother had always work to do, as there were childbirths almost every day in one village or the other, and, being a hereditary midwife, she was always sent for. Javni had four sisters and two brothers, of whom only her brother Bhima remained. She loved her parents and they loved her too ; and when she was eighteen she was duly married to a boy whom they had chosen from Kalkad. The boy was good and affectionate, and he never once beat her. He too was a washerman, and—"What do you think ?" said Javni, proudly, "he washed clothes for the Maharaja when he came here," "Really !" I exclaimed, encouragingly, and she continued. Her husband was, I have said, a

good man, and he really cared for her. He never made her work too much, and he always cooked for her when she fell ill. One day, however, as the gods ordained, a snake bit him while he was washing clothes by the river, and in spite of all the magic that barber Subba applied, there was no hope, and he died that very evening, crying to the last, "Javni, Javni, my Javni."

I should have expected her to weep here ; but she continued without any exclamations or sighs. Then came all the misfortunes, one after the other, and yet she knew they were nothing, for above all, she said, "Goddess Talakamma moved and reigned."

Her husband belonged to a family of three brothers and two sisters. The elder brother was a wicked fellow, as he played cards, and got drunk two days out of three. The second was her husband, and the third was a haughty young brute, who had already, it was known, made friends with the concubine Siddi, the former mistress of priest Rangappa. He was married and he treated his wife as though she were a beast of burden, and once he actually beat her till she was bleeding and unconscious. There were many children in the family, and since one of the sisters-in-law lived in the same village, her children too came to play in the house. So Javni lived on happily, working at home as usual, and doing her little bit to add to the family funds.

She never knew, she said, how it all happened, but one day a policeman came, frightened everybody and took away her elder brother-in-law, for some reason which nobody understood. The women were all terrified and everybody wept. The people in the village began to spit at them and reduced their crops to stubble out of hatred and revenge, by driving cattle into their fields. Shame, poverty and quarrels followed one another. And as the elder brother-in-law was in prison, the younger with his mistress, the women at home made her life miserable. "'You dirty widow,'" they would say and spit on me. I wept and sobbed and often wanted to go and fall into the river. But I knew Goddess Talakamma would be angry with me and I stopped each time I wanted

to kill myself. One day, however, my elder sister-in-law became so intolerable, that I ran away from the house. I did not know to whom to go, for I knew nobody, and my brother hated me—he had always hated me. “But anyway, Ramappa,” she said lowering her voice, “a sister is a sister. You cannot deny that the same mother has suckled you both.”

“Of course not!” I said.

“But he never treated me like you treat your sister.”

“So you are jealous, you wretched widow!” exclaimed my sister waking up. She always thought people hated or envied her.

“No Mother,” she pleaded.

“Go on!” I said.

“I went to my brother. As soon as his wife saw me, she swore and spat and took away her child who was playing on the verandah, saying it would be bewitched. After a moment my brother came out. ‘Why have you come?’ he asked me. ‘I am without a home,’ I said. ‘You dirty widow, how can you find a home to live in, when you carry misfortune wherever you set your feet.’ I simply wept. ‘Weep, weep!’ he cried, ‘weep till your tears flood the Cauvery, but you will not get a morsel of rice from me. No, not a morsel.’ ‘No,’ I said: ‘I do not want a morsel of rice. I only want a shelter, wide as my palm to rest myself.’ He seemed less angry. He looked this way and that and cried: ‘Do you promise me not to quarrel?’ ‘Yes!’ I answered, still weeping.’ ‘Then for the peace of the spirit of my father, I will give you the little hut by the garden door. You can sit, weep, eat, die....do what you like there,’ he said. I trembled. In the meantime my sister-in-law came back. She frowned and thumped the floor, swearing at me, and calling me a prostitute, a donkey, a witch—Ramappa. I never saw a woman like that. She has made my life—a life of tears.”

“How?” I asked.

“How? I cannot say. It is ten or twenty years since I set foot in their house, and every day I wake up

with 'donkey's wife' or 'prostitute' in my ears."

"But you don't have anything to do with her?" I said.

"I don't. But the child sometimes comes to me, because I love it, and then my sister-in-law rushes out, roaring like a tigress, and says she will skin me to death if I touch the child again."

"Then, you should not touch it, Javni!"

"Of course, I would not if I had my own. But Ramappa, that child loves me."

"And why don't they want you to touch it?"

"Because they say I am a witch and an evil spirit." She wept.

"Who says it?"

"They. Both of them say it. But still, Ramappa" — here she suddenly turned gay—"I always keep aside mangoes or cakes that Mother gives me, and I give them all to the child. So it flies away from the mother each time the door is open. It is such a sweet, sweet thing." She was happy.

"How old is it?" I asked.

"Four," she answered.

"Is that their only child?"

"No. They have four more—all grown up. One is already as big as you."

"And the others, do they love you?"

"No, they all hate me, they all hate me—except that child."

"Why don't you adopt a child?" I suggested.

"No, Ramappa, I have a lamb, and that is enough."

"You have a lamb too?" I said surprised.

"Yes, a lamb for the child to play with now, and when the next Durga festival comes, I will offer it to Goddess Talakamma."

"Offer it to the Goddess! Why Javni, why not let it live?"

"Don't speak sacrilege, Ramappa. I owe a lamb every three years to the Goddess."

"And what does She give in return?"

"What! What!" she was angry. "All! Every-



thing ! Would I live if the Goddess did not protect me ? Would that child come to me if the Goddess did not help me ? Would Mother be so good to me if the Goddess did not bless me ? Why Ramappa, everything is Hers. O ! Great Goddess Talakamma, give everybody good health, long life, and all the joys. Protect me, Mother !” She was praying.

“What will She give if I offer a lamb ?” I asked.

“Everything, Ramappa. You will grow learned ; you will become a big man, and you will marry a rich wife, Ramappa,” she said, growing affectionate all of a sudden. “I have already been praying for you. When Mother said she had a brother, I said to the Goddess : ‘Goddess, keep that boy strong and virtuous, and give him all the joys of Heaven and earth . . . ,’”

“Do you love me more or less than your brother’s child ?” I asked to change the subject. She was silent for a moment.

“You don’t know ?” I said.

“No, Ramappa. I have been thinking. I offer a lamb to the Goddess, for the sake of the child. I have not offered a lamb for you. So how can I say whom I love more ?”

“The child !” I added.

“No, no, I love you as much, Ramappa.”

“Will you adopt me, Javni ?” No, I was not joking.

She broke out into a fit of laughter which woke my sister.

“Oh ! Be quiet,” cried Sita.

“Do you know Javni is going to adopt me ?” I said.

“Adopt you ! Why does she not go and fall into the river ?” she retorted, and fell asleep again.

“If you adopt me, Javni, I will work for you, and give you food to eat.”

“No, learned Ramappa. A brahmin is not meant to work. You are the ‘chosen ones’.”

“No, we are not,” I murmured.

“You are ! You are ! The sacred books are yours. The Vedas are yours. You are all, you are all—you are

the twice-born. We are your servants, Ramappa—your slaves.”

“I am not a brahmin,” I said, half-jokingly, half-seriously.

“You are, Ramappa, I know you are. You want to make fun of me?”

“No, Javni. Suppose you adopt me?” I persisted. She laughed again.

“If you don’t adopt me, I shall die and grow into a lamb in my next life, and you will buy it. What will you do then?”

She did not say anything. It was too perplexing.

“Now,” I said, feeling sleepy “now Javni, go to sleep, and think tomorrow morning whether you will adopt me or not?”..

“Adopt you! You are a god, Ramappa, a god! And I cannot adopt you.”

I dozed away. Only in the stillness I heard Javni saying: “Goddess, Great Goddess, as I have vowed, I will offer Thee my lamb; protect the child, protect Mother, protect her brother, protect Master, O Goddess! protect me!...”

The Goddess stood silent in the little temple by the Cauvery, amidst the whisper of the woods.

A July morning, two summers later. Our cart rumbled over the cobbled street, and we were soon at the village square. Javni was running behind the cart with tears rolling down her cheeks. For a full week I had seen her weeping all the time, dreading the day when we would leave her, and she would see us no more. She was breathless; but she walked fast, keeping pace with the bullocks. I was with my sister at the back of the cart, and my brother-in-law sat in the front beside the cartman. My sister too was sad. In her heart she knew she was leaving a friend. Yes, Javni had been her only friend. Now and again they gazed at each other, and I could see Javni suddenly sobbing like a child. “Mother, Mother,” she would say, approaching the cart: “Mother don’t forget me....”

"I will not. No, I assure you, I will not." Now my sister too was in tears.

"Even if she should, I will not," I added. I too would have wept had I not been self-conscious.

When we touched the river it was already broad morning. Being summer the ferry was not plying and there was so little water that we were going to wade through. The cartman said he would rest the bullocks, for a moment, and I got out to breathe the fresh air, and more, to speak to Javni.

"Don't weep," I said to Javni.

"Ramappa, how can I help weeping? Will I ever see again a family of gods like yours? Mother was kind to me, kind like a veritable goddess. You were so, so good to me. And Master...." Here she broke again into fits of sobs.

"No, Javni. With a heart like yours, who will not blossom forth into godhead?" I murmured.

But she simply wept. My words meant nothing to her. She was nervous and trembled over and over again. "Mother, mother...." she would say between her sobs, "Oh, Mother...."

The cartman asked me to get in. I jumped into the cart with a heavy heart.

"Hoi,...hoi...." cried the cartman. And the bullocks stepped into the river.

Till we were on the other bank I could see Javni sitting on a rock and looking towards us. In my soul I still seemed to hear her sobs. A huge peepal rose behind her, and across the blue waters of the river and the vast sky above her, she seemed so small, so insignificant.....

## A KASHMIR IDYLL

*Mulk Raj Anand*

It was about ten years ago during a brief visit to Kashmir that the incident I am going to relate took place. But neither time nor space has blurred the deep impression it made on me then, and it has haunted me for many days, so that I must needs put it down.

There were originally four of us in the party including myself ; the three others being a tall, imposing Sikh gentleman, both tailor-made and God-made ; a sensitive young poet, a Kashmiri whose family had emigrated to the plains and made good as Kashmiris always do when once they have left the land where, though nature is kind and generous, man has for centuries most foully and cruelly oppressed man ; and a hill boy who cooked for us.

We had loaded our luggage on a tonga and walked the three hundred and seventy-five miles on the road from Jammu across the Himalayas in slow stages, by the beds of the silent Ravi and the surging Chenah. On the peak of the Banibal we had held conversation with the wind that comes from the Kashmir valley, bearing a load of loveliness and pain, the golden exultation of the saffron and the white sigh of a people who toil unrewarded.

We had descended to the natural spring of Ver Nag from which a few drops of water trickle into a stream which becomes the river Jhelum at Islamabad and which, dividing the whole valley into two halves, flows into the lake Wular and then cuts its way through two hundred miles of mountains into the plains.

From Ver Nag, a village of dark and labyrinthine streets full of small mud huts, the multi-coloured flowers on whose roofs give no hint of the misery which dwells within, we had traversed into the main valley, a dusty

road bordered by cubist poplars and cypresses.

We had made our headquarters in a houseboat at Srinagar, and then taken the advice of a tourist's guide which the government of His Highness the Maharaja of Kashmir had designed specifically for the use of English visitors, though a few Indians also took advantage of it if they had a smattering of this wonderful, official language, and we had decided to undertake short trips to the remote valleys and the unspoiled outlying ranges of the Himalayas within the borders of Kashmir.

We visited the Sonamarg valley, where the scarlet eyes of the morning are blinded by the glare of the snow that lies perpetually on the mountain peaks leading through the Zogila pass to the Chotta Tibet, and where the sleep of the night is continually disturbed by the growling of the angry Indus rushing through glaciers and across high stones and boulders to its tyrannical passage in the Punjab.

We pushed by a difficult track across a crumbling mountain to the cave of Amarnath, where the dripping of water from melting crystals had formed a snow image in the shape of a phallus which the superstitious go to worship in thousands at a particular time of the year, believing it to be the penis of the Great God Shiva.

We went to Gulmarg, the valley of wild roses, to Lilanmarg, where the lilies of the field grow for miles and miles, angelic and melancholy. We ascended to Aparwat, the highest peak in Kashmir, on top of which is a crystal clear pool which echoes back the faintest whisper.

We saw Gandhrbal and Hari Parbat, the Shalimar and the Nishat; we went everywhere, devouring the beauty of Kashmir's landscapes, trudging along its byways, loitering among its stars, squandering whole days and weeks in search of exquisite moments.

And then, there was nothing left to do except to sail among the waterways of the valley, to seek new harbours for our houseboat in the Dal lake and in the shadows of the various gardens, wherever the caprice of our idle destinies directed the heart-shaped oars of our boatman.

A cousin of the poet of our company, a nobleman and courtier of His Highness the Maharaja, who had sought us out in an obscure corner of the Dal and showered the blessings of fruit and meat and drink upon us with a generosity that betokened his eminence and his affluence, offered us the hospitality of an island he possessed nearby.

Though grateful for his kindness, we had been finding the gentleman's hospitality rather embarrassing because it involved us in a friendship with the great man which we could not spontaneously accept, for his grace was rather a silly young man with the manners of a lout and a high blood pressure in his opulent flesh. So we excused ourselves by saying that we were intending soon to complete our tour of the valley by going in our kitchen boat to the Wullar. But it was not easy for us to escape from the tentacles that he spread around us by that slick and sure turn of phrase that had so obviously carried him to his high position at court. He suggested that if we didn't accept his hospitality, he would like to accept ours and accompany us to the Wullar "in your kitchen boat for a change," because, he said: "I am tired of this grand style in which I have to live, and would like to be one of you."

We were so bounden to the Nawa Zaffar Ullah, as the worthy was called, for the many favours he had heaped on us that we naturally could not refuse him, even though he became more patronising and added that not only would he like to come with us, but two of his most intimate friends would like to accompany us also, and that he would like to supply provisions and order extra boatmen for our service on the way.

We were in for it, and we accepted all his offers because it would have been more strenuous to find excuses than to let ourselves become completely ineffectual pawns in his high hands. So, accompanied by him and his friends (a surly little judge of the High Court of Kashmir and a most superficial young trader in hides and skins), one evening we started.

The shades of night were falling and we floated between the heaven and the earth in a dream as yet

slightly disturbed by the Nawab and his companions.

The river flowed, and our boat flowed with it, without much help from our boatman, his wife, his sister or his little daughter.

But we had hardly drifted down to the silent places of our hearts when dinner was announced. •

The Nawab had brought a sumptuous meal prepared by his servants all ready to be served ; rice coloured and scented with saffron, curried fowls perfumed with musk, and there were goblets of champagne, bottled in 1889.

Having compromised us into accepting his delicious food, it was only natural that the Nawab should deem it fit to amuse us with the gifts of his speech. He told a few dirty stories and then launched a discourse of which the ribaldry was so highly spiced with a deliberate obscenity that whoever felt nauseated or not, I, at least, who have never been over-righteous, turned aside, thought of the pride of my emotions, made my words the stars and surrendered myself to the bosom of the night.

When we awoke at dawn our boat had unbarred the floodgates and glided into a veritable ocean of light. As far as I could see, for miles and miles, the azure waters of the Wullar spread around us, a vast fluttering expanse of mercury within the borders of the fiery sun-scorched hills.

The Nawab sought to entertain us with a song. But his voice was cracked and only his two friends sat appreciatively acclaiming his genius, while we wandered off to different parts of the boat, helping with the cooking, dressing, or lazily contemplating the wizardry by which nature had written a poem of broken glass, crumbling earth and blue-red fire.

For, truly, the Wullar is a magnificent spectacle under the red sky of morning.

I gazed upon the placid plain of this water spell-bound, enchanted. I lent myself to the whispers of the rippling breeze that was awakening the sleepy lotuses ; tempted by an unbearable desire to be one with

it, I plunged headlong into its midst and bathed in it to my heart's content. Then I sat, watching the blandishments of the elements from the shadow of a canopy under which the Nawab and his friends were playing cut-throat bridge.

By ten o'clock we had crossed the lake to Bandipur, a dull insignificant little village on the road to Gilgit, the last stronghold of British Indian power before the earth ventures out into the deserts of Central Asia, uncharted except by shepherds till the Soviets brought the steel plough of prosperity there.

The Nawab here ordered the Tehsildar to bring him ten chickens, five dozen eggs and some fruit for our delectation. And he took us about to the drift houses of the village to show us, or rather to show himself off to, the abject inhabitants of the township.

Our boatman came running and said that we should hurry because he wanted to row across the middle of the lake before noon, as a squall generally arose in the Wullar every day at noon, and it was likely to upset the boat if the vessel hadn't already crossed the danger zone before midday.

The Nawab abused him in Kashmiri, a language in which curses seem more potent than prayers.

We pressed the boatman's point, and since His Grace could not swear at us, he said he would get a man on *begar* <sup>(1)</sup> to help the boatman and his family to row across the lake more quickly, and he tarried.

The boatman came again after half an hour and caught us all waiting impatiently for the Nawab's return from a visit to the lavatory ; His Grace had suddenly thought it fit to have a hair-cut and a turkish bath in a *hamam*, not caring what happened to us. When he did at last emerge from his ablutions, and heard not only the insistent appeals of the boatman, but our urgent recommendations, he, as a mark of his favour, clemency, or whatever you may call it, forthwith stopped a young lad of the village who was walking along the cobbled high street and ordered him to proceed to our boat and

(1) *Forced Labour.*



help to row it to Srinagar.

"But Srinagar is fifty miles away, Sire," said the young man, "and my mother has died. I am on the way to attend to her funeral."

"You bloody swine, dare you refuse?" snarled the Nawab. "You are a liar!"

"No, Nawab Sahib," said the man joining his hands. "You are like the God in mercy and goodness. Please forgive me. I am footsore and weary after a twenty mile march in the mountains where I went to fetch my uncle's mare. And now my mother has died and I must see the Mullah about securing a place for her for her burial."

"Run, run towards the boat," bawled the Nawab, "or I'll have you flogged by the police. Do you not know that it is the kingdom of which I am a nobleman. And you can't refuse to do *begar*."

"But, Sarkar!" murmured the young Kashmiri, his lips trembling with the burden of a protest which could not deliver itself in the face of the Nawab which glistened not only with the aura of light that the barber's massage had produced but with the anger which the man's disobedience had called forth.

"Go to the boat, you son of an ass," shouted the Nawab and raised his hand.

At the merest suggestion of the Nawab's threat to strike, the young man began to cry, a cry which seemed childish and ridiculous in a grown up person, particularly because there were no tears in the boy's large, wide awake eyes. And he moaned: "Oh, my mother! Oh, my mother," suddenly, mechanically, in a voice which seemed to express more the racial cowardice of the Kashmiri, which has been bred by the oppression of one brutal conqueror after another, than his own real hurt.

But the Nawab was too thick-skinned to see the hurt in the boy's soul. He looked at the big eyes weeping without tears, and heard the shrill crescendo of his cry, and began to laugh.

"Let us leave him, Nawab Sahib," we said. "We will give the boatman a hand and can row across the

lake to safety if we hurry."

"Wait, wait," the Nawab said, as he caught hold of the man by his left ear and, laughing, dragged him towards the boat.

The *begari*, who had begun to cry at the merest suggestion of a threat, howled the heavens down at the actual touch of the Nawab's hand on his body, while the Nawab, who had only laughed derisively at first, now chuckled with a hoarse laughter which flushed his cheeks.

The man extricated his ear from the Nawab's grasp as we were about five yards from the boat, and perhaps because he thought he had annoyed His Grace by so overt an act of disobedience, he knelt down and, still weeping and moaning, joined his hands and began to draw lines on the earth with his nose as a sort of penance for his sin.

At this the Nawab burst out with redoubled laughter so that his face and his form seemed to swell to gigantic proportions and tower above us all.

"Look !" he said, flourishing his hands histrionically without interrupting his laughter.

But the situation which had been tense enough before had become extremely embarrassing now as the man grovelled in the dust and rolled about, weeping, wailing, whining and moaning, and sobbing hysterically, with the most abject humility.

"Don't weep, don't moan, fool," said the Nawab, screwing up his eyes which were full of the tears of laughter, and he turned to the boatman saying : "Lift the clown from there and put him on the boat."

The boatman obeyed the commands of the Nawab, and His Grace having stepped up to the deck behind the *begari*, we solemnly boarded the vessel.

The *begari* had now presumably half decided to do the work, as, crying his hollow cry and moaning his weird moan, he spat on his hands and took up the oar.

The Nawab, who cast the shadow of his menacing presence on the boy, was more amused than ever and laughed hysterically, writhing and rumbling so that his

two friends caught him in their grasp and laid him to rest under the canopy. He sought to shake them off with the weight of his belly and with the wild flourishing of his hands, and the reverberating groans of his speech came, muffled with continuous laughter, from his round red cheeks.

The boat began to move, and as his oar tore the water aside, the *begari* ceased to cry and grieve with the same suddenness with which he had begun.

"Look!" the Nawab bellowed, his hysterical fit ending in a jerky cough which convulsed him as a spark of lightning shakes a cloud with thunder. "Look!" he said, and pointed towards the *begari*.

But the balls of his eyes rolled; suddenly his face flushed ghastly red and then turned livid, his throat twisted like a hemp rope and his hand fell limp by his side.

We all rushed towards him.

One of his friends had put his hand on the Nawab's heart, another was stroking his back.

A soft gurgle like the last faint notes of lightning reverberated from the Nawab's mouth. Then there was the echo of a groan and he fell dead. He had been choked by his fit of laughter.

The boat rolled on across the still waters of the Wullar the way it had come, and we sat in the terrible darkness of our minds, utterly dumb and silent, till the *begari* began to cry and moan again:

"Oh, my mother! Oh, my mother!"

# THE COACHMAN AND THE NEW CONSTITUTION

*Saadat Hussain Minto*

Mangu was a coachman by profession. In the cab-rank at the railway station he enjoyed the reputation of being a very experienced and well-informed man of the world. True, he possessed no academic qualifications ; had, in fact, never been to school. In spite of this, however, he seemed to know about all sorts of things. Those among his fellow-workers who wished to keep in touch with events inside or outside Lahore tacitly acknowledged his wisdom. They had even given him the title of " Master " in recognition of his knowledge.

He had built up this reputation of omniscience by a very simple technique. Not long ago, for instance, he had picked up vague rumours of an impending civil war in Spain from one of his fares. As soon as he got the opportunity he walked up to Gama Chowdhry, slapped him on his shoulder, and prophesied in a most knowing fashion : " You mark my word, Chowdhry, very soon there is going to be war in Spain." And when Gama Chowdhry asked about the geographical location of Spain, Master Mangu calmly replied : " In England, of course. Where else do you think ?"

Very soon after, a war did break out in Spain, and eventually the news reached everyone. This greatly enhanced Master Mangu's prestige among the cabbies at the railway station, and every time they gathered round their hubble-bubble they talked of his extraordinary foresight.

Master Mangu was a man with strong likes and dislikes. Among other things, he had a violent aversion to the English. He had his reasons for his hatred of the ruling race. " They are robbing India right and left,"

he would say, "and they subject us to every kind of tyranny." But, as a rule, he did not confess to a more personal and even stronger reason for his dislike; the fact that the Tommies from the cantonment bullied him and generally treated him as though he were a pariah dog. Master Mangu's aversion almost bordered on physical distaste. He objected even to the colour of their skin. The sight of their red faces always excited him to a pitch of hysteria. He used to say: "I can't bear the sight of them. Their blotched faces remind me of corpses—corpses with the decayed skin peeling off in bits."

On occasions when he had a quarrel with some drunken Tommy he would be upset the whole day. Then in the evening at the cab-rank, smoking a cigarette or puffing at the hubble-bubble, he would begin to fulminate against the iniquity of the ruling race. "They came to beg for a few cinders and now they have taken possession of our house. These monkeys won't even let one breathe in peace. The way they lord it over us you would think we were their forefathers' slaves."

But even this general denunciation did not appease his anger. "Did you see the bastard's face?" he would go on, concentrating the fire of his wrath against the particular offender; "it looked as if he had leprosy, absolutely like a leprous corpse. One blow from me would have finished him. And yet the way he was shouting and hopping about the place, you would think he was going to kill me. I swear by your life, I had a good mind to smash his skull. But there is no bravery in kicking a corpse. That is what held me back." And then, after a brief pause during which he wiped his nose against the sleeve of his khaki shirt, he would start muttering again. "God is my witness. I am sick to death at having to put up with the whims of these sons of swine. When I see their ill-omened faces it makes my blood boil. I wish we could one day make our own laws and our own constitution which would deliver us of them. Then at least we would be able to call our lives our own...."

One day he picked up two men at the Law Courts. They were two Marwari businessmen who were returning home after attending to some civil case in which they were involved. They were talking vaguely about the new India Act.

"They say on the first of April a new constitution is going to come into force," one of them was saying. "Does it mean that everything will be changed?"

"Not everything, of course," the other replied, "but it is rumoured there are going to be a lot of changes and Indians are going to get their freedom."

"Does it also mean that there will be new regulations about the rate of interest?" the first Marwari asked apprehensively.

"I don't know about that," said the second. "We must find that out from our lawyer."

Master Mangu heard their conversation with ill-concealed joy. He kept glancing back at them and softly stroked his big moustache. Normally he was in the habit of keeping up a constant stream of abuse against the horse and was not sparing with his whip. But now he relaxed the reins and began to mutter affectionately to the animal: "Come on, son; come on....let me see you run like the wind."

After dropping the Marwaris at their destination he stopped at his favourite confectioner's shop in Anarkali and ordered himself half a *seer*<sup>(1)</sup> of butter-milk. He drank it slowly, in ecstatic little gulps. When it was finished he sucked at the drooping ends of his moustache with evident satisfaction. Then, belching loudly, he stepped on to his tonga and cracked the whip, not on the horse's back, but high in the air....

That evening when he returned to the cab-stand he found no one there whom he knew. He was greatly chagrined. Here he was dying to break to his friends the most sensational news he had ever heard and none of them was there. It seemed an unpardonable lapse on their part to be absent on such an occasion.

Up and down he walked across the corrugated iron

(1) *Approximately two lbs.*

shed which was the cab-stand, up and down, in a state of intense agitation. His mind was in a tumult. The news of the coming constitution seemed to open up before him a world of inconceivable possibilities. He remembered the apprehensive way in which one of the Marwaris had asked about the future of moneylending under the new constitution. It gave him great delight. His lips under his bushy moustache twisted into a sarcastic smile. He cursed the moneylenders under his breath. "They are like bugs in poor people's beds. I hope the new constitution will be like boiling water for them." He was happy—in expectancy. Particularly, there was one thought which gave him great satisfaction. "As soon as the new constitution comes into force," he assured himself, "the white rats" (the name he had given to the members of the ruling race) "with red snouts will disappear into their holes for good."

At last he saw bald-headed Nathu coming. He rushed forward to meet him, and taking hold of his hand said: "Let us shake hands, brother. I am going to tell you something which will give you such pleasure that it will make hair grow on your skull." And he began to tell his friend all about the new constitution, dwelling with great relish on details which he had fabricated from his own imagination. "You wait, brother," he vociferated; "things are going to happen, I tell you. I have always said this 'King of Russia' is going to show us a thing or two one of these days."

Master Mangu had heard a good deal about the socialistic activities of the Soviet Government. He had heard, too, about the new constitution in Russia and many other things that were happening in that country—heard them with admiration and envy. For this reason in his mind the new India Act came to be associated with the 'King of Russia,' who, he considered, must be behind the changes that were supposed to come into operation on the first of April. Also, for some time past, he had been hearing about the Red Shirt movement in Peshawar. This, too, he now connected with the 'King of Russia' and the new constitution. Indeed, all the

stories of arrests of terrorists in various cities of India and cases of sedition which he remembered now seemed to take on a new significance and to foreshadow the shape of things to come. He felt pleased with himself and the world.

A few days after this event he picked up two barristers in his tonga. They were heatedly discussing and criticising the new constitution. Master Mangu listened to them in silence. As there were many English words in their conversation, he could not quite follow what they meant. However, he heard one of them say to the other with great vehemence: "The second part of the new constitution deals with Federation. It passes my understanding. Such a Federation has never been heard of in the whole history of the world. From a political standpoint this Federation is all wrong. In fact, I would say it is no Federation at all."

From all this Master Mangu surmised that the two men were against the new constitution and did not want their country to be free. Under this impression, he looked at them every now and then with great scorn. He silently cursed them and called them 'sons of toadies.' By now he had become a great champion of the new constitution and could not tolerate anyone criticising it. For him it represented a glittering promise of fulfilment in the distance.

The month of March was at last drawing to its end and in a few hours the new month was to begin. The weather was unusually cold. There was a keen wind blowing from the north. Master Mangu rose early to greet the historic dawn. He went to the stable and harnessed his horse. Ripples of pleasure rose in his heart and seemed to spread through his body. He made a long detour through many narrow and broad streets in the dim light of dawn. He wanted to see something new. But everything seemed just as before, old as the sky above. Everything except the plume of many coloured feathers which he had bought for his horse the day before for fourteen and a half annas especially to



celebrate the inauguration of the new constitution. The sound of the horse's hoofs, the tarred surface of the road, the lamp posts standing at regular intervals, the signboards over the shops, even the resonant bells round the neck of the horse—there was nothing new in all these. Nothing at all, as far as he could see. Yet he was not despondent.

"It is early yet," he consoled himself. "Even the shops are not yet open. The High Court opens at nine o'clock. It is then that the new constitution will be proclaimed."

When he was passing in front of the Government College he heard the College clock strike nine. Students crowding into the gates were all well dressed. But even so Master Mangu did not think they were suitably celebrating the occasion. He turned the tonga to the right and reached Anarkali. Half the shops were now open and there were many more people in the street. The confectionery shops were crowded with customers. Flocks of pigeons were settling on the telegraph wires. Master Mangu, however, was not interested in any of these sights. His mind was preoccupied with more serious matters.

Master Mangu was a very impatient and quick tempered man. Not long ago, when his wife was expecting a child, he had spent the last few months of her pregnancy in a state of impatient anticipation. He was no doubt sure that one day the child would be born, but he could not bear to wait for the event. He wished he could see the child in the womb, then the actual birth could come in its own good time. Often, possessed by this strange desire, he would feel his wife's belly or put his ears against it to hear the breathing of the unborn. Once or twice he got so tired of waiting that he began to abuse his wife. "Why do you always remain in bed like a corpse?" he shouted at her. "Can't you move about a little? That will bring some strength into your limbs. What is the use of lying supine all the time like a log of wood? Do you think you can give birth to a child without exerting yourself a little?"

His wife, seeing such impatience on his part, would say: "You haven't sunk the well yet, but you are already beside yourself with thirst."

To-day, however, Master Mangu was prepared to be much more patient than was his habit. As he came out of Anarkali and turned into the Mall Road he slowed down. Outside an automobile dealer's shop he was hailed by a man who wanted to go to the cantonment. He settled the fare and said to himself: "This is all to the good. Perhaps I will hear some news of the new constitution in the cantonment."

After dropping his fare he lit a cigarette and moved from the front to the back seat. Winding the reins round his right hand, he allowed the horse to proceed at a leisurely pace. The horse gave a short neigh as though in appreciation of his master's kindness. Soon Master Mangu was lost in thought. He was wondering what kind of licensing system for tongas would be introduced under the new regime. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that at first he did not even hear somebody calling him. It was only when he turned back to look that he saw a Tommy beckoning him from a distance.

Not much love was lost between him and the Tommies, and the spectacle of one of them beckoning to him made his smouldering hatred flare up. His first thought was to take no notice of the man and go his way. On second thoughts, however, he changed his mind. "It is absurd not to take their money," he argued with himself. "After all, I have spent fourteen and a half annas on this new plume for the horse. Why shouldn't I get that out of his pocket?"

He turned the tonga round cleverly and cracked his whip over the horse's ears. In a few seconds he drew up near the Tommy.

"Where do you want to go, Sahib?" he asked. There was subtle sarcasm in his question. Especially when he uttered the word 'Sahib,' his upper lip with its thick growth of hair seemed to fall downwards, and the dim line which ran from the end of his nostril to his chin became deeper as though somebody had drawn a line with a sharp knife in a dark ebony mask. His mask-like

face was covered with a diabolical grin.

The Tommy seemed to sense his hostility, but unable quite to understand its cause, he simply said in a rough voice: "That's none of your bloody business. Let me get in."

A recognition suddenly flashed through Master Mangu's brain. "It is the same fellow," he thought, and the thought seemed to dance in his mind that this was the same man with whom he had had trouble last year. The Tommy had been drunk and Master Mangu had to listen to his abuse without a word of protest. He had, of course, wanted to retaliate in an appropriate manner, but he knew that, if the matter went to the Courts, in all such cases the dice were heavily loaded against the coachmen and the Law was always on the side of white men.

But now the new constitution was in force. And that made a world of difference.

"Where do you want to go?" Master Mangu repeated the question, sharp like the crack of a whip.

"Diamond Market," the Tommy answered in an exasperated tone.

"The fare will be five rupees." Master Mangu's moustache was quivering with emotion.

The Tommy was flabbergasted. "Five rupees?" he shouted incredulously: "Five rupees? What the hell...."

"Yes, yes...." Master Mangu cut him short. His hand almost involuntarily assumed the shape of a clenched fist. "Five rupees, not a pice less. Stop all this chatter and get in if you want to go."

The Tommy also remembered the last year's incident. He wondered whether he should give Mangu a dose of the old medicine. He advanced towards him and, pointing his cane at him, ordered him to get down from the tonga. As Master Mangu showed no signs of obeying, he hit Master Mangu on his bare legs with his well-polished cane several times.

Master Mangu did not retaliate for a moment. He glared at the short-statured Tommy from his height. If looks could kill, then Mangu's looks alone would have

crushed the Tommy to death. But looks do not kill, and Master Mangu was determined to have his revenge. Suddenly he clambered down and then, like a lightning stroke, his fist shot out—right under the Tommy's chin. He pushed the Tommy away and began to hit him right and left.

Completely taken aback by the turn of events, the Tommy tried to evade Master Mangu's fist. When he realised that the cabby was under the spell of some kind of madness and saw his bloodshot eyes, he started shouting for help at the top of his voice.

His cries only served to enrage Master Mangu even more. He intensified his blows. Every time he struck his victim, he kept muttering : " Still the same swagger, eh ? You don't know it is the first of April, do you ? My boy, we are the rulers in this country now. You better look out, my boy, it is our *raj* now."

A crowd had gathered. With great difficulty two policemen dragged Master Mangu away from the Tommy. As he stood there, held between two policemen, his breast was heaving violently and his mouth was frothing at the corners. He still had the peculiar grin on his face as he spoke to the bewildered crowd and said in a breathless voice : " They can't lord it over us any longer. The days when Khalil used to fly pigeons are over. We have a new constitution, brothers ; we have a new constitution."

The discomfited Tommy's face was twisted with pain. His eyes darted from Master Mangu to the crowd, as he stood speechless with bewilderment.

The constables took Master Mangu to the police station. All the way down, and even when he was inside the police station, he kept shouting : " What about the new constitution, brother ? What about our new constitution ?

" New constitution ? What new constitution are you raving about, you idiot ? There is no new constitu-

tion. It is the same old constitution here as before."

And with these words the policeman pushed him into a cell and banged the door in Master Mangu's face.

*(Translated from the Hindustani)*

## OUR LANE

*Ahmed Ali*

I used to live in Chelon ka Koocha. The door of my room was divided into two halves, and by closing the lower one the upper half was turned into a window. This window opened on a narrow lane. In front was the shop of Siddiq, the Banya, and adjoining it was the shop of Aziz, the carpenter. Round about were the shops of the palanquin bearers, the druggist, the Paanwala, and a few other shops, like the butcher's, dealers in all sorts of bric-a-brac, and the sweetmeat seller's.

People could go to other localities through our Mohalla. And all kinds of people passed before my window. Sometimes a person dressed all in white went by, finding relief from the scorching summer sun under his umbrella. Others rigged out in English clothes went past, stepping lightly over the sprinkled water or quickly jumping away as someone threw water on the road, avoiding the urchins or glaring at them angrily for standing and staring at them. Sometimes the passer-by would get exasperated and raise his stick or umbrella to strike the boys, but they would run away, shouting : "Look, what a sight !"

Then the gruff voice of Mirza, the milk-seller, would be heard :

"What are you up to, you rogues ! Have you nothing to do at home ?"

And if someone were near, Mirza would complain to him :

"Look at their mothers. How they leave their children to roam about like consecrated bulls. And the rogues have nothing to do but swear and make mischief."

His small red eyes would glow. Scratching his triangular beard, he would turn to some customer, and, taking out curds from the earthen pot or milk from

the iron urn, would put a little cream on top and pass it on to him.

They said that Mirza came of good stock. His father had turned him out of the house when still a boy for not remembering his lessons. After roaming about aimlessly for some time, Mirza had opened a shop. His father had asked him a number of times to forgive him and come back home, but Mirza had refused. Then he got married, and his business began to flourish. His sweets made of cream were renowned throughout the city for their excellence, and his milk was always delicious. Whenever a person came to buy milk Mirza tossed it from an earthen cup into a bowl and back again with a swinging movement until it swished and started frothing and bubbling. Then he skimmed the cream from the top of the milk so skilfully with a big flat circular spoon that the milk was not disturbed at all.

Sometimes his wife sat in the shop. She had grown old. Her face was wrinkled, her back bent, and her gums were toothless. Her broad forehead and fair complexion proclaimed that she came of a good family.

Their business had become slacker, for they could not work so hard now that they were getting on in years. Their only son was dead, and there was no one to lend them a helping hand.

During the days of Non-co-operation, when the movement for freedom was surging like a wave from one end of the country to the other, Mirza's son had taken part in a procession together with his friends. The air was ringing with shouts of *Bande Matram* and *Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai*.<sup>(1)</sup> At the Clock Tower a whole battalion of Tommies waited, armed to the teeth. The Superintendent of Police, the Deputy Commissioner, and a few other Englishmen stood nervously watching the fury of the mob and the demonstration of national anger. The people wanted to go forward, but the soldiers held them up. The people rushed to break through the line of soldiers, and the Deputy Commissioner gave the order to open fire.

(1) *Hail Motherland. Victory to Mahatma Gandhi.*

Under the shower of bullets many were killed, among them Mirza's son.

When, after a long time, they were allowed to take away the dead, his friends brought the body of Mirza's son home.

All the shops were closed and the lane was desolate and silent. The winter sun shone ashy and pale. The smell of putrefaction rose from the gutters which had not been cleaned. When the dead body was brought in Mirza and his wife were completely stunned. They could not believe, for a moment, that their son, who was alive a little while ago, who had been laughing and that very morning had prepared the sweets and had rinsed and washed the urns, who had changed and gone to see his friends, was no longer alive. They stared at the corpse, besmeared with blood, and Mirza's wife embraced it and began to rend the air with her cries. People tried to pull her away, but she would not be separated from her son's dead body.

"My darling, my loved one," she wailed.

"May God destroy these Farangis ! <sup>(1)</sup> They have murdered my loved one. May they die !"

Mirza rushed in and out of the house like a madman.

Siddiq Banya had opened his shop, and when Mirza passed by, his hair all dishevelled, Siddiq called out :

"What happened after all, brother ?"

There was no sign of tears in Mirza's eyes, but his face was a picture of pain.

"I am done for. My everything, my son, is dead."

And he walked away towards the house.

The customers who were standing in front of the shop asked Siddiq the cause of death. Siddiq bent forward and cast a glance at the receding figure of Mirza. A strong gust of wind blew and the lane was full of dust. A tattered bit of paper rose in the air, and, tumbling and tossing, began to descend again. Mirza's long hair waved in the wind, and he disappeared in the by-lane.

(1) *The British.*



"Happened? He had gone to non-co-operate, and was shot down. Why won't they mind their own business? Serves them right to go against the Government. He was a well-built, handsome young man, but he fell a prey to these Hell-ants and Khadderites." <sup>(1)</sup>

As he talked he put a spoon into a pot. Many pots were fixed side by side in the wall and looked like a dovecot. Taking out some cereal Siddiq pushed it towards a customer. The customer who was listening to Siddiq nonchalantly began to tie it in a piece of cloth. Suddenly he happened to look at the cereal, and said :

"I say, Bashsha, what is this you are giving me? I had asked for 'arhar.' Make haste or my wife will shout at me."

In her house, Mirza's wife was beating her breasts, crying loudly and cursing both the English and Gandhi. When Yaamin's mother heard of the accident she rushed to console her. She had also lost a young son who was crushed under a falling wall, and was now bringing up his children by doing the work of a seamstress. Both of them embraced and wept and cried, and Mirza's wife was consoled a little . . . At last they took him away to bury him. The night was dark and gloomy. The wind blew cold, and the Mohalla was more chilly because of the damp. In the dim light of kerosene lamps the whole place looked dreary and desolate, and not a live thing was visible on the road.

For some time after this incident one could often hear the sad voice of Mirza's wife singing :

*Suddenly the times have changed,  
And there's no peace for my soul . . .*

Then she would become silent and busy herself with work.

In front of my house was an old date-palm tree. At one time it used to be heavy with fruit, and bees flocked round it. Birds came and perched on its expansive boughs, and stray pigeons perched there at night. But now its leaves had withered, the boughs had decayed

and fallen, and its trunk, ugly and dark, stood like a scarecrow in the darkness of night. No more did the birds flock to it, no more were the bees attracted towards it. Only now and then some raven perched on its bare top and croaked itself hoarse ; or a kite sat there and then, crying shrilly, flew away. In the growing light of dawn its trunk shone out against the sky ; but in the sunset it gradually faded from sight and was lost in the darkness. Often as I entered the house at night my eye fell on its thick and ugly trunk and followed it up towards the sky. The stars were shining, and in a line with its top was the end-star of the Great Bear ; but the tree trunk stood between me and the sky, and I could not see the expanse of the shining stars.

A mad woman frequently came to our Mohalla. Someone had shorn her hair ; and her head looked like a walnut on her heavy and well-built body. God-fearing people often dressed her in clothes, but after a few hours she would be naked again. Saliva always ran down her mouth, and her arms hung stiff by her sides. She often pranced and capered on the road, and mumbled incoherently like the dumb.

The moment she set foot in our Mahalla a whole crowd of boys gathered round her and followed her, clapping and jeering and pelting her with stones, shouting. "Pugly, Pugly."<sup>(1)</sup> The woman helplessly cried, "Ain Ain," and hid in corners. Whenever this happened in front of Mirza's shop, he shouted at the boys : "You idiots, haven't you got to die ? Get away from here. Run away." But after a little while the boys would collect together again.

Often even the grown-ups cracked jokes at her. She was rather ugly, but she was not old. Her belly was bulging out, and often Munnoo, who belonged to a well-to-do family, but had now turned loafer, would put his hand on her belly and ask her :

"Well, when are you going to produce a baby ?"

The mad woman would utter a wild and painful cry, and thrusting her hands forward would turn towards

(1) *Mad Woman.*

some passer-by or shopkeeper and point at Munnoo. In her cracked, ugly voice was a request and prayer, the request some helpless person makes to his superior or someone stronger than him to forgive and save him. But other people also joined in the fun and laughed merrily . . . They said that some men had dragged her away to the Old Fort one night and since then her belly began to bulge out . . . .

Another thing which was very conspicuous in our Mohalla were dogs, sickly and starving. Many were suffering from mange, and their bones showed through their skins. They bared their sharp teeth and scratched their backs, or closed in mortal combat over a bone in front of the butcher's shop. They same stealthily sniffing the gutters with their tails between their legs, and quarrelled over refuse meat. But often it so happened that just as they had espied some piece of meat or a bone the kites swooped down and carried it away. Then, pressing their tails between their legs, they sniffed at the spot, like a man who has realized that he is being made fun of ; or they tried to hide their shame by quarrelling with each other.

Early in the morning was heard the voice of Shera, the hawker who sold parched gram. He went from lane to lane hawking his grains which he carried in a bag slung across his back. He was about forty years of age, and very lean and thin. Wrinkles had already appeared on his face, and there were grey hairs in his close-cropped beard. In his eyes, which had dark hollows round them, hunger and poverty, misery and squalor were reflected clearly. Across his eyeballs ran thin red threads, which appeared either on account of intoxication, or fever and starvation, and were visible from a distance. On his head he wore a dirty cloth cap, on his back hung a tattered shirt, and through his meagre loin-cloth showed his thin, bony thighs.

Years ago he had come to our city from some neighbouring district in search of a job. At night he used to

lie down in a mosque, and he wandered on the roads during the day. But like the towns and villages the big cities have hardly any jobs to offer, and Shera could not procure any work.

Mir Amaanullah used to come for prayers to this mosque. Shera related to him his tale of woe. Mir Sahib took pity on him and took him to his house. Shera was an honest and industrious man, and after some time Mir Sahib gave him five rupees.

"I am giving you this money," said the Mir Sahib, "so that you may start some business. You may return this money whenever you have it ; otherwise it doesn't matter."

Shera started hawking Kabuli gram and *daal seo*.<sup>(1)</sup> In a short time many people of the locality came to know him, and soon he had many customers. Within a year Shera returned Mir Sahib's money ; brought his wife and children from home ; rented a small house, and was very happy.

Just at that time, Abdul Rashid was condemned to death for the murder of Swami Shardhanand. All the Musalmen of the city were furious and excited. On the day of the execution thousands of men collected outside the jail. They all wanted to rush the gate and get in somehow. But when the police refused to hand over Abdul Rashid's dead body, the fury of the mob got beyond control. They wanted to demolish the jail and to bury Abdul Rashid, who had killed an 'infidel,' in a manner befitting a martyr who had sacrificed himself in the cause of Islam.

Shera had gone to the Juma Masjid<sup>(2)</sup> that day on business. The sky was covered with a cloud of dust, and the roads looked deserted and desolate like a graveyard. He met a number of hungry dogs licking the refuse and offal. In the gutter lay a dead pigeon. Its neck was twisted to one side, its stiff blue legs were sticking upwards, its wings were wet in the dirty water, and one of its eyes which was visible glared in an ugly and sickening way.

(1) *Fried Lentil.*

(2) *Famous Mosque in Delhi.*

Shera stopped to look at it. Just then from the turn in the road rose the cries of the 'Kalma', which is an Arabic verse, recited when taking a dead body to the graveyard. People were bringing a dead body on their shoulders. As the funeral drew near, the crowd at the back became thicker, so much so that far and wide only human heads could be seen. The crowd had run away with Abdul Rashid's dead body. At the same time the police came down the road, stopped the funeral procession, and arrested a number of persons. Shera was one of them, and he was sentenced to two years' rigorous imprisonment for taking part in a 'riot.'

Finally, he was released. But his customers had forgotten his once familiar voice, and he did not have any money to start his old business again. Some people collected two rupees and gave them to him so that Shera could again start some business, and again he went about hawking roasted gram. But his voice had lost its old resonance, and misery and sorrow were heard through every cry he uttered. Still, as they heard his voice, the children rushed to buy gram, and he took it out by handfuls from his bag, weighed and handed it to them.

Another frequenter of our Mohalla, who came every night, was a blind beggar. He was short in stature, and his small beard was always dust-begrimed. He carried a broken bamboo stick in his hand with which he felt his way. He looked insignificant and futile. But his voice had a sadness and pathos which spoke of the transience of life. It came, as if from far away on the winter nights, bringing with it gloom and hopelessness. I have never heard a sadder voice and it is still ringing in my ears. Bahadut Shah's poem which he used to sing brought back the memory of the olden days when Hindustan had not yet been burdened with her new sorrows. His voice did not merely convey the grief of Bahadut Shah, the last of the Moghuls, but in it was heard the plaint of India's slavery. His voice came from far away :

*I am tired of this tempestuous storm they call life ;  
I'd welcome death in preference to such living.*

But the well-to-do people of the Mohalla shrank from giving him alms, for he was addicted to hashish.

One summer night about ten o'clock I was sitting in my room. Most of the shops had closed, but the sellers of meat cutlets and Mirza had not yet closed theirs. On either side of the road people were lying on their *charpis*. Some had gone to sleep, while others were still chatting. The air blew dry and hot, and the smell of putrefaction rose from the gutters. Underneath the wooden plank jutting out of Mirza's shop sat a cat as if in wait for its prey. A man came and bought milk worth an anna, and after drinking it threw the earthen cup on the ground. The cat stole out of her hiding place and began to lick it.

Just then Kallo passed beneath my window followed by Munnoo. Kallo was young. She was dark, but youth imparted to her face a freshness and glow. Her body swayed when she walked, drunk with youth, and her figure was slim and lithe with the sap of life. She was a maidservant at Munsif Sahib's, whose wife had brought her up since childhood. Now she had become a widow, her husband having died some three years ago. But the young men of the Mohalla had their eyes on her all the time.

When she reached the corner of the lane, Munnoo caught her by the hand. Furious with shame and anger, Kallo shouted :

"You lump of flesh ! God's scourge on you ! How dare you lay hands on a lonely woman."

"Do you mean to waste your youth ?" said Munnoo.

"Get away. Let go my hand !"

Near by on the roof of a house two cats began to fight. Kallo gave a jerk and freed her hand.

"You beaten-with-a-broom, may you die young ! You think I have no strength. I shall have you beaten so that you shall remember it for the rest of your life."

Mirza, who had gone inside the house for a minute, came back just then. He could hear Kallo's last sentence, and asked her :

"What's the matter, Kallo?"

But without once looking back, Kallo disappeared in the alley.

Aziz the carpenter, who was sleeping in front of his shop, was awakened by the noise. When he saw Munnoo standing there he inquired:

"What's wrong, Munnoo?"

Munnoo stood there looking crestfallen and injured. His face had suddenly gone dry and looked thin and long. His eyes were venomous and glittered like the eyes of a snake.

On a heap of dust and refuse the eyes of a cat gleamed in the dark for a moment and vanished again. Munnoo turned to Aziz and said in a sad, short voice:

"Nothing. It was just that Kallo."

"Could you strike any bargain?"

"Oh, no. Couldn't get at her. She ran away. But where can she get to?"

The cats were still quarrelling on the roof. They purred fiercely and then screamed and caterwauled, as if they were going to devour each other. Then one of them mewed loudly and ran away and the purring tom-cat followed at her heels.

Aziz the carpenter asked Munnoo to sit down on his bed, and produced a *biri* <sup>(1)</sup> from under his pillow and pushed it towards Munnoo. But Munnoo took out a silver cigarette-case from the pocket of his shirt.

"Well," said Munnoo, "here is a cigarette which you will never forget for the whole of your life."

And he took out a cigarette and gave it to Aziz.

"I say, from whom have you pinched this time?"

"What can I lack? What God denies, Asifud Daula supplies. And if I had just relied on Allah, life would have been miserable."

"I say, talk sense. Fear Him. You will have to pay for this by burning in Hell fire."

"O, go away. Don't be an ass. Eat, drink, and be merry; that's all I know. More than this my master hasn't taught me. I believe in twirling my moustache

(1) A crude, tobacco-wrapped cigarette.

and idling my time away. Even if Hell exists, we shall see when we get there. Why should we worry now?"

"Stop, stop! Don't utter such blasphemies. Everything comes to pass, and then you will forget all this boasting."

"All right. Now that you have started talking in this vein, I am off."

"Just a minute. You see, something has been worrying me for a long time. Swear that you will tell me."

"All right, you won't have cause to complain. By Allah, I will tell you."

"Tell me, why do you steal?"

"O no, this wasn't agreed."

"Look here, you can't go back on your word."

"All right, I have lost. To tell you the truth, I would never have stolen anything. You know that my relations are rich people."

"That is why I wonder so much."

"Well, I had a cousin. The boy was rather handsome. It was about ten years ago. I sort of fell out with him. We used to read in the same class, and he went and told the master and had me punished. The devil got into me. I said, all right, if I don't have my revenge, I will wash my moustache in urine. One day I stole his satchel. There were very expensive things in it. That's how it began. Another time I took a fancy to an uncle's cigarette-case. Ask him for it I could not; so I pinched it. After this I became adept in my business. And if you want to know the truth, these people will never give anything to the poor. You can get things out of them only in this fashion."

"But if you are caught?"

"Again you have started asking those silly things. I am off now, or at home there will be a quarrel for nothing."

Saying this he got up, and slapping Aziz loudly on the back, he went away . . .

Hisaan-ur-Rahman used to call the *azaan* <sup>(1)</sup> in the

(1) *Call to Prayer.*



mosque of our Mahalla. He was a strong, well-built man. His complexion was dark, and his beard was dyed red with henna. His head was bald, but on the sides and on the nape hung long hair. A big callous had appeared in the centre of his forehead as a result of constantly rubbing his forehead on the floor during prayer, and shone conspicuously from a distance. Often he passed beneath my window clearing his throat loudly. He wore loose khaddar pyjamas and a loose shirt without any collar, and on his shoulder he carried a big red painted kerchief. There was that rare resonance and charm in his voice which is seldom bestowed on man. His *azaan* was famous far and near, and his voice could be heard in several Mahallas. Even the clearing of his throat before he called the *azaan* was audible at a distance.

They called him Balaal Habshi, after one of Mohammed's companions, a Negro who was renowned for the glory of his voice. The two had these in common—their glorious voices and their dark complexions.

One evening I was sitting alone on the roof of my house. Thin clouds were spread over the sky, and the sunlight, with the dust and dirt of the city, dyed them a turbid red. Far away the smoke of factory chimneys was floating in the air. The hum of the city came from the distance like the buzz of flies. And everywhere there was heartrending hopelessness, that painful gloom which is the distinguishing feature of our cities, which conveys to us the sense of poverty and filth ; of the futility and helplessness of life. A pigeon flew across the dust-covered, dirty clouds, and was lost in their drab colours. From afar sounded the whistles of railway engines. Flocks of pigeons rose from the high roofs and minarets, hovered about and settled down again. As far as the eye could see, ugly, filthy buildings jugged their heads into the sky. Far and wide there was a sense of the futility of life. Here and there some two-or three-storeyed houses were being built ; and their wooden structures stood between the vision and the sky ; but the colours of the bamboos and girders did not jar on the eyes and, lost in the tones of the clouds, looked hazy and dim.

Just then Hisaan-ur-Rahman began to clear his throat, and his ringing golden voice filled the atmosphere. There was sadness, yet such peace in the voice that my boredom vanished and was changed into a serene gloom. There was neither glory nor greatness in that voice, but it communicated a sense that life is transient and ephemeral ; that this life is as meaningless and vain as the dust and dirt, and the smoke on the face of the clouds. A prey to my futile thoughts, I listened to the *azaan* until it neared the end and the silence-producing sound of "*Haiya-alas-salah, Haiya-alas-salah*," began to ring in my ears. Then the sound of "*Haiya-alal-falah, Haiya-alal-falah*" rose on the wind, and so gradually came to a close that one did not feel at all that the voice had stopped, and it seemed that silence had always been reigning over the earth ; a deep silence which seemed to tell me that somewhere very far away from this earth there is another world in which the Beginning and the End are the same, and this universe is vain and meaningless. The voice was lost in the ether where the earth comes to an end on the horizon and the sky begins, and no one can distinguish where the earth ends and sky begins.

And I sat thinking how well this *azaan* symbolizes our life. There were the same helplessness and futility in it which have become an inseparable part of our minds and souls, the same hopelessness and gloom, the same dread of reality which force us to lead a subjective life. Ignoring the world we dream inflated dreams of Creation and the End ; forgetting man we spend our time in quest of God. And everything in our life leads us towards it, all our songs sing to us the same lullabies. There are shackles on our feet, but we have become so used to their rubbing that they do not seem to be real. Our hands are fettered, there are iron rings round our necks, our tongues have been tied, but we are oblivious to everything. Our bodies have become numb, our souls are rapt in slumber ; and we are happy in our helplessness and lead a senseless life of indifference, until Death drags us into her arms. Our glory and shame are not different, our

life and death are just the same: like the *azaan* we change from life to death so quietly that no one can say whether we were really alive or if it was all a mere shadow and delusion and we, the loved ones of Death, drunk with its lullabies from time immemorial, had been sleeping a sound and peaceful sleep . . . .

One night some three or four persons were talking in Mirza's shop. One of them was Aziz, the carpenter, another was the Kavabi, and a few others had collected in the shop. The hubble-bubble was placed before them, and they were pulling at it by turns.

"Well, friend!" one of them was saying, "I see and wonder at His glory in everything."

At this my curiosity was aroused, and I began to listen attentively. In the meantime a customer came up, asked for five pice worth of milk, and stood ~~aside~~. Mirza took an earthen cup and reached his ladle to the urn to take out milk.

"The other day I was going through Chandni Chowk," the voice said, continuing its story, "when I saw a young cow approaching from in front. Just at that spot lay a small child. The cow stopped when she came near the child. I said to myself, let's see what she does now. But to my surprise she put all her four feet together and took a jump and went clean across the child. There was a manifestation of His glory in that animal's wisdom."

One of Mirza's hands was near the urn; in the other he held the cup, and he was staring into the speaker's face.

"Great is His glory," said Aziz.

Mirza filled his bowl with milk and began to toss it.

"Mysterious are His ways," another began. "Once Hazrat Suleiman (the prophet Solomon) was ordered to build a palace. Well, he began to make preparations. The jinns collected colossal stones and slabs in no time, and the work was started. You know how quickly the jinns work. So high to-day, so much higher to-morrow—within a few days the palace rose to the sky. Hazrat Suleiman went there every day to see if any one was

neglecting his work and wasting his time. Well, then one day the palace was ready. Only the bits of stones and pieces of slabs remained to be cleared. The next day Hazrat Suleiman again rested his behind on his stick and issued the order to clear the lumber. But in the meantime some other order had been issued from Above. Now see the manifestation of His glory that while the palace was being cleaned of all the lumber the worm set at Hazrat Suleiman's stick. But he stood there firmly, until at last the worm had eaten the whole of the stick and set to work at its top. But he was completely oblivious, and the stick fell down in ashes, and he was killed. But what I am wondering is who will now throw out those pieces of stones and bits of slabs?"

Aziz held the stick of the hubble-bubble in his hand near the mouth and was gazing at the speaker. One of Mirza's hands which held the bowl was raised in the air and the other one with the cup was lower down near the floor, and he was lost in the story.

I burst out laughing, but suddenly fell to thinking of who will really throw out these 'pieces of stones and bits of slabs.'

A strong gust of wind blew and the kerosene lamp went out leaving the road in total darkness. The people got up from Mirza's shop and began to disperse. I too went inside the house . . .

*(Translated from the Hindustani by the Author.)*



## FELLOW FEELING

R. K. Narayan

The Madras-Bangalore Express was due to start in a few minutes. Trolleys and barrows piled with trunks and beds rattled their way through the bustle. Fruit-sellers and beedi and betel sellers cried themselves hoarse. Latecomers pushed, shouted, and perspired. The engine added to the general noise with the low monotonous hum of its boiler ; the first bell rang, the guard looked at his watch. Rajam Iyer rushed along the platform at a terrific pace with a small roll of bedding under one arm and an absurd yellow trunk under the other. He ran to the first third-class compartment that caught his eye, peered in and, since the door could not be opened because of the congestion inside, scrambled in through the window.

Fifteen minutes later Madras flashed past the train in window-framed patches of sun-scorched roofs and fields. At the next halt, Mandhakam, most of the passengers got down. The compartment, built to "Seat eight passengers ; four British Troops, or six Indian Troops," now carried only nine. Rajam Iyer found a seat and made himself comfortable opposite a sallow, meek passenger, who suddenly removed his coat, folded it and placed it under his head and lay down in the space he had occupied while he was sitting. With his knees drawn up almost to his chin, he rolled himself into a ball. Rajam Iyer gave him an indulgent compassionate look. He then fumbled for his glasses and pulled out of his pocket a small book, which set forth in clear Tamil the significance of the obscure *Sandhi* rites that every Brahmin worth the name performs thrice daily.

He was startled out of his pleasant languor by a series of growls coming from a passenger who had got in at Katpadi. The newcomer, looking for a seat, had been

irritated by the spectacle of the meek passenger asleep and had enforced the law of the Third-Class. He then encroached on most of the meek passenger's legitimate space and began to deliver home-truths which passed by easy stages from impudence to impertinence, and finally to ribaldry.

Rajam Iyer peered over his spectacles. There was a dangerous look in his eyes. He tried to return to the book, but could not. The bully's speech was gathering momentum. "What is all this?" Rajam Iyer asked suddenly, in a hard tone. "What is what?" growled back the newcomer, turning sharply on Rajam Iyer.

"Moderate your style a bit," Rajam Iyer said firmly.

"You moderate yours first," replied the other. There was a pause.

"My man," proceeded Rajam Iyer, "this ~~sort~~ of thing will never do."

The newcomer received this in silence. Rajam Iyer felt encouraged and drove home his moral: "Just try to be more courteous, it is your duty."

"You mind your business," replied the newcomer.

Rajam Iyer shook his head disapprovingly, and drawled out a "No."

The newcomer stood looking out for some time and, as if expressing a brilliant truth that had just dawned on him, said: "You are a Brahmin, I see. Learn, sir, that your days are over. Don't think you can bully us as you have been bullying us all these years."

Rajam Iyer gave a short laugh, and said: "What has that to do with your beastly conduct to this gentleman?"

The newcomer assumed a tone of mock humility, and said: "Shall I take the dust from your feet, O Holy Brahmin? Oh, Brahmin, Brahmin." He continued in a sing-song fashion: "Your days are over, my dear sir, learn that. I should like to see you trying a bit of bossing on us."

"Whose master is who?" asked Rajam Iyer philosophically.

The newcomer went on with no obvious relevance :

"The cost of mutton has gone up out of all proportion. It is nearly double what it used to be."

"Is it?" asked Rajam Iyer.

"Yes, and why?" continued the other. "Because Brahmins have begun to eat meat and they pay high prices to get it secretly." He then turned to the other passengers and added: "And we non-Brahmins have to pay the same price, though we don't care for secrecy."

Rajam Iyer leaned back in his seat, reminding himself of a proverb which said that if you throw a stone into a gutter it only spurts filth in your face.

"And," said the newcomer, "the price of meat used to be five annas per pound. I remember the days quite well. It is nearly twelve annas now. Why? Because the Brahmin is prepared to pay so much, if only he can have it in secret. I have with my own eyes seen Brahmins, pukka Brahmins with sacred threads on their bodies, carrying fish under their arms, of course all wrapped up in a towel. Ask them what it is, and they will tell you that it is plantain. Plantain that has life, I suppose! I once tickled a fellow under the arm and out came the biggest fish in the market. Hey, Brahmin," he said, turning to Rajam Iyer, "what did you have for your meal this morning?"

"Who, I?" asked Rajam Iyer. "Why do you want to know?"

"Look, sirs," said the newcomer to the other passengers; "Why is he afraid to tell us what he ate this morning?" And turning to Rajam Iyer: "Mayn't a man ask another what he had for his morning meal?"

"Oh, by all means. I had rice, ghee, curds, brinjol soup, fried beans."

"Oh, is that all?" asked the newcomer with an innocent look.

"Yes," replied Rajam Iyer.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, how many times do you want me to repeat it?"

"No offence, no offence," replied the newcomer.

"Do you mean to say I am lying?" asked Rajam



Iyer.

"Yes," replied the other, "you have omitted from your list a few things. Didn't I see you this morning going home from the market with a banana, a water banana, wrapped up in a towel, under your arm? Possibly it was somebody very much like you. Possibly I mistook the person. My wife prepares excellent soup with fish. You won't be able to find the difference between lentil soup and fish soup. Send your wife, or the wife of the person who was exactly like you to my wife to learn soup-making. Hundreds of Brahmins have smacked their lips over the soup prepared in my house. I am a leper if there is a lie in anything I say."

"You are," replied Rajam Iyer, grinding his teeth.

"You are a rabid leper."

"Whom do you call a leper?"

"You!"

"I? You call me a leper?"

"No. I call you a rabid leper."

"You call me rabid?" the newcomer asked, striking his chest to emphasize: "Me?"

"You are a filthy brute," said Rajam Iyer. "You must be handed over to the police."

"Bah!" exclaimed the newcomer. "As if I am frightened of police and don't know them."

"Yes, you must have had countless occasions to know the police. And you will see more of them yet in your miserable life, if you don't get beaten to death like the street mongrel you are," said Rajam Iyer in great passion. "With your foul mouth you are bound to come to that end."

"What do you say?" shouted the newcomer menacingly. "What do you say, you vile humbug?"

"Shut up," Rajam Iyer cried.

"You shut up."

"Do you know to whom you are talking?"

"What do I care who the son of a mongrel is?"

"I will thrash you with my slippers," said Rajam Iyer.

"I will pulp you down with an old rotten sandal,"

came the reply.

"I will kick you," said Rajam Iyer.

"Will you?" howled the newcomer.

"Come on, let us see."

Both rose to their feet simultaneously.

There they stood facing each other on the floor of the compartment. Rajam Iyer was seized by a sense of inferiority. The newcomer stood nine clean inches over him. He began to feel ridiculous, short and fat, wearing a loose dhoti and a green coat, while the newcomer towered above him in his grease-spotted khaki suit. Out of the corner of his eye he noted that the other passengers were waiting eagerly to see how the issue would be settled, and were not in the least disposed to intervene.

"Why do you stand as if your mouth were stuffed with mud?" asked the newcomer.

"Shut up," Rajam Iyer snapped, trying not to be impressed by the size of his adversary.

"Your honour said that you would kick me," said the newcomer, pretending to offer himself.

"Won't I kick you?" asked Rajam Iyer.

"Try."

"No," said Rajam Iyer, "I will do something worse."

"Do it," said the other, throwing forward his chest and pushing up the sleeves of his coat.

Rajam Iyer removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves. He rubbed his hands and commanded suddenly: "Stand still!" The newcomer was taken aback. He stood for a second baffled. Rajam Iyer gave him no time to think. With great force he swung his right arm and brought it near the other's cheek, but stopped it short without hitting him.

"Wait a minute, I think I had better give you a chance," said Rajam Iyer.

"What chance?" asked the newcomer.

"It would be unfair if I did it without giving you a chance."

"Did what?"

"You stand there and it will be over in a fraction of a second."

"Fraction of a second? What will you do?"

"Oh, nothing very complicated. I will slap your right cheek and at the same time tug your left ear; and your mouth which is now under your nose, will suddenly find itself under your left ear and, what is more, stay there. I assure you, you won't feel any pain."

"What do you say?"

"And it will all be over before you say 'Sri Rama'."

"I don't believe it," said the newcomer.

"Well and good. Don't believe it," said Rajam Iyer. carelessly; "I never do it except under extreme provocation."

"Do you think I am an infant?"

"I implore you, my man, not to believe me. Have you heard of a thing called ju-jitsu? Well, this is a simple trick in ju-jitsu, perhaps known to half-a-dozen persons in the whole of South India."

"You said you would kick me," said the newcomer.

"Well, isn't this worse?" asked Raham Iyer. He drew a line on the newcomer's face between his left ear and mouth, muttering "I must admit you have a tolerably good face and round figure. But imagine yourself going about the streets with your mouth under your left ear . . ." He chuckled at the vision. "I expect at Jalarpet station there will be a huge crowd outside our compartment to see you." The newcomer stroked his chin thoughtfully. Rajam Iyer continued: "I felt it my duty to explain to you beforehand. I am not as hotheaded as you are. I have some consideration for your wife and children. It will take some time for the kids to recognise papa when he returns home with his mouth under . . . how many children have you?"

"Four."

"And then think of it," said Rajam Iyer: "you

will have to take your food under your left ear, and you will need the assistance of your wife to drink water. She will have to pour it in."

"I will go to a doctor," said the newcomer.

"Do go," replied Rajam Iyer, "and I will give you a thousand rupees if you find a doctor. You may even try European doctors."

The newcomer stood ruminating with knitted brow.

"Now prepare," shouted Rajam Iyer, "one blow on the right cheek. I will jerk your left ear, and your mouth . . ."

The newcomer suddenly ran to the window and leaned far out of it. Rajam Iyer decided to leave the compartment at Jalarpet.

But the moment the train stopped at Jalarpet station, the newcomer grabbed his bag and jumped out. He moved away at a furious pace and almost knocked down a cocoanut-seller and a person carrying a trayload of coloured toys. Rajam Iyer felt it would not be necessary for him to get out now. He leaned through the window and cried: "Look here!" The newcomer turned. "Shall I keep a seat for you?" asked Rajam Iyer.

"No. My ticket is for Jalarpet," the newcomer answered, and quickened his pace.

The train had left Jalarpet at least a mile behind. The meek passenger still sat shrunk in a corner of the seat. Rajam Iyer looked over his spectacles and said: "Lie down if you like."

The meek passenger proceeded to roll himself into a ball.

Rajam Iyer added: "Did you hear that bully say that his ticket was for Jalarpet?"

"Yes."

"Well, he lied. He is in the fourth compartment from here. I saw him get into it just as the train started."

Though the meek passenger was too grateful to doubt this statement, one or two other passengers looked at Rajam Iyer sceptically.

## LITTLE MOTHER

*Ismat Chughtai*

"Now supposing this is a hut," Genda and I imagined to ourselves as we crept under the bush. And we bent down and began to sweep the ground with our hands. Soon we were sitting happily on the clean and well-swept floor of yellow earth. After a while we found ourselves busy at our favourite game of playing bride. Genda made a veil of her red and dirty head-cloth, pulled it low down over her face, and sat huddled up like a bride. Gently I drew the veil aside and saw the bride's face. A deep flush came into Genda's round and chubby face. Her eyelids began to throb with a wistful merriment as she tried to suppress her laughter. . . "Now. . . Genda, now it's my turn," I said with envy. . .

"Oho!" Brother said, peeping through the branches. "What's going on here?"

Nervously Genda tore the veil away from her face and sat mortified. Our hearts began to thump loudly. If anyone had caught us at playing the bride we would have been thrashed. We always played this wishful game alone, concealed from the eyes of others.

"Well," I said coquettishly, "we are just playing."

Brother was in a good mood perhaps. He crept under the bush and sat near us. But he soon got tired.

"But why are you sitting here, you fools?" he said, pushing away a branch that was hurting his nose.

"And you, Genda," he said, pinching her lovely cheeks: "Why are you here? I am going to tell Natha."

Genda opened her big brown eyes wide and looked all around.

"Oh, no. Please don't," she said, and, collecting her small loose pyjama, made as if to run away.

"No, Genda, don't run away," I said peremptorily, detaining her.

"But Grandfather will thrash me," she said in a frightened voice.

"No he won't. You have finished all the work."

"All right. Sit down," Brother said gently, pulling Genda towards him.

"But you, Bibi, I will surely have you thrashed. You are dirtying your clothes by sitting on the ground."

"Go away. Do you think I am afraid of you?" I said, though frightened, and began to brush my clothes.

"Genda, O Genda. Where are you?" Bahu's voice thundered. Bahu was Natha, brother's wife.

Disentangling her arm from Brother's grip, Genda rushed away.

The whole game was spoiled. I was piqued and began to quarrel with Brother.

"Oon, oon, get away from here," I said almost crying.

"You she-devil!" he said hoarsely, grinding his teeth, and after slapping me loudly on the back he disappeared.

"Why should a widow care to dress and look beautiful?" Genda philosophised.

"Widow?" I said as with my shirt I cleaned the brick that I was rubbing on a stone to make red powder for putting in the parting of my hair.

"Yes, of course, I am a widow."

I felt as if Genda had said it almost with pride.

"And me?" I asked her.

"You," she said contemptuously. "You are a virgin. Hi. hi. hi." She made fun of me.

My heart sank. Genda always looked down upon me, and I dared not become her equal. She was married last summer. She was dressed in fine clothes. Bright silver ornaments became her own property. For days she went about tinkling her ornaments coquettishly and I did not even come into the picture. I just looked at her enviously and ran after her like a greedy cat. I

would count her bangles, set her ankle bells right, or if her head-cloth, decorated with a false border, ever touched the ground I would pick it up lovingly. And everyone doted on her.

But mother is so hard on me that even if I make a veil of the eiderdown and sit like a bride she begins to scold me.

"Why are you spoiling the bedclothes" she chides me, as if the eiderdown would be torn to shreds if I use it as a veil. And if I ask her to give me a head-cloth she snubs me. "No. You would only drag it about in the mud."

I admit I am younger than Genda, but I am not so young that I cannot become a bride. If you ask me I shall sit for the rest of my life with a veil hanging low down over my face. I am a woman too, after all . . .

Genda's husband died in the rainy season. For nights and days the whole house mourned and wept. Genda's bangles were broken and she too cried. "Poor Genda," everyone said with pity, and consoled and caressed her. But no one even took notice of me. They told me I was just a child, I was of no account. How long will I remain a child? That is what I should like to know. In actual truth, I have grown so tall that my blue pyjama does not fit me any more; and my pink shirt had to be given away because I had outgrown it. I had only one nice shirt, and even that became too small for me. When it comes to nice things they tell me I am too old for them, but when it suits their purpose they call me a child. I have not been able to understand whether I am grown up or not. It really worries me. . . But oh, it does not matter. . .

"When you are a widow you don't put on jewels and nice clothes?" I asked Genda aimlessly.

"When one's husband is dead for whom should one dress?" Genda assumed a tone of seriousness. "Red powder in the parting of the hair, bangles on the arms, all these are meant only for one's husband. Isn't that so?" She tried to pass off as something authentic what she had heard others say.



"Look, Genda, I have made so much powder," I said collecting the brick dust into a heap.

Genda began to look at the small heap of red powder like a full-fledged widow. Soon we began to laugh.

"But don't tell Bahu. All right. Come," she said, bending forward. And both of us began to prepare our toilet.

Like an expert hardresser I made Genda's tousled hair stick in place with water and put the red powder in the parting.

"There," I said, admiring my own work.

Genda flushed red and shyly hid her face behind her veil, and began to laugh happily.

"Now, now!" I scolded her. "The coiffure will be spoiled."

"Now let me do your hair," said Genda as she wetted my hair.

"And the beauty-mark?" I winked at her.

"Yes, of course," she assured me.

In a few minutes we had finished our toilet and, adjusting out head-cloths, sat in a corner. As we looked at each other's faces we thought how comely we were and began to blush.

Brother came along just then and a deep flush came into Genda's face. Hurriedly we removed the beauty-spots from our foreheads and began to giggle.

Brother pushed me aside and sat near Genda. She began to blush. Passionately grinding his teeth he pinched her cheeks, while she muttered "oon, oon," and sat huddled up.

"And what is this?" he said contemptuously, kicking the heap of brick powder with his foot.

"It is toilet-powder. We have made it," I said with pride.

He began to rake it with his finger playfully, and pressed Genda's foot.

"Come, I shall put some in your hair." And he took a little powder and put it in the parting of her hair.

"Oon," she whined, and removed the powder.

"But, Brother, Genda is a widow. How can she

put powder in her hair?" I tried to show off my knowledge.

"She will have to, you she-devil!" he said to me impulsively; then caught hold of Genda's hands and pushed her back. She hid her face.

"Look here, Genda, I shall never talk to you again," he threatened her. Immediately Genda uncovered her face.

"Genda," Brother said drawing closer to her, "will you get married?"

"Go away," she said, blushing.

I also tried to blush, just to imitate her. Genda and I used to talk of marriage for hours, and blush. Brother could never have known all the things we had heard Sister and grandmother talk as we lay concealed under the bed.

"What do you mean by that?" Brother said, nudging her. "Tell me, will you get married?"

Suddenly all three of us were startled by the sound of Bahu's anklet bells. She was coming to draw water from the well.

"Genda!" she shouted, and the next moment she had come into our retreat. "You widow! You are sitting here as if you had nothing to do. Go and heat the iron," she growled.

Genda quietly walked away, avoiding coming near her. But Bahu rushed after her and, catching her by the hair, pulled her and tugged her.

"And how dare you dress your hair and put powder in the parting! Have you forgotten that you are a widow?" she said, giving her a hard slap.

Genda ducked to avoid the blow and ran away. Brother and I were mortified.

I had always hated Bahu. Whenever she beat Genda I took revenge on her by spoiling something. For instance, this time I put a handful of dust in her clean brass pot. And Brother thrashed Natha on the pretext that she had spoiled two of his collars.

"Smell," Genda said, bringing the collar of her torn

shirt close to my nose.

I smelt.

"But, oh, it's attar! Where did you get it?" I asked impatiently.

"Brother gave it to me." And she began to laugh happily. I suppressed my feeling of envy and also laughed.

"Genda!" Brother called from the veranda. "Take this coat and press it." She smiled at me meaningfully, and walked towards the house, swaying her lithe body to and fro like lightning flashing in the sky. But I walked awkwardly, like a horse trotting. I . . . I felt sad and walked into the garden and, sitting on the edge of the water tank, began to churn the water with a stick. The red brick powder which I had prepared in the morning was still lying there. Brother had put it in Genda's hair. But he had forgotten to put it in mine. No. He had ignored me deliberately, although I am his real sister. And Genda? She is no relation of his. I hated my brother and began to churn the water more violently.

"Tut, tut. What are you doing, Bibi?" said Meva Ram from behind in a reprimanding tone.

I stared at Meva. He is no relation of mine either, I thought. When I looked at his hands I became sad. He never washes them nor cleans the filth from them. He is always digging the earth.

"Meva," I said softly. "Come here." And I began to watch the waterdrops fall from the stick one by one.

"What do you want?" he said indifferently, and, pushing his cap over his brow, began to scratch his head.

"Rub this toilet powder on my forehead," I said in a commanding tone.

"Do you call this toilet-powder?" And he began to laugh loudly, and turned to go.

"Listen, Meva; don't go away," I said, as a new thought struck me.

"What is it, Bibi?" he said, slightly turning back.

"Meva. . . will you get married?" I asked with

a beating heart.

"Get married?" he said. "But I am already married." He began to strike the handle of the hoe against a tree.

"When?" I asked in a disappointed voice.

"Oh, ages ago," he said, dismissing the whole affair summarily.

"Then you are a widower," I said decisively. He began to laugh.

"Oh, no," he said. "Can't you see my wife sitting there in the hut?"

"Were you really married to your wife?" I asked with wonder.

"Of course," he said, and walked away.

So, that old woman whom I had taken to be Meva Ram's mother was in reality his wife. What a funny world this is, I said to myself, and began to churn the water with all my might. . . . Suddenly I bent forward and sniffed at the collar of my shirt, hoping to smell the scent of attar. But there was no scent there. I could only smell soup which I had spilled on it in the morning. I was annoyed with myself.

Genda was going towards Brother's room stealthily, carrying the laundry wrapped up in a towel. I became curious, and going after her peeped through a chink in the door.

Genda was sitting on the floor sorting out the clothes. Brother stood in a corner scratching his head.

"You are counting them all wrong," Brother said, and caught hold of her hands. She cast a wistful glance at Brother, frowned, then began to giggle. When he pulled her towards him she wantonly fell flat on the floor, hugging it, and would not move. When Brother tickled her, however, she got up quickly. As Brother came forward she slapped him on the face.

I was so astonished that I almost fell back. Genda had the courage to slap Brother when the whole household lived in fear of him! I thought he would strangle her in no time. But, grinding his teeth, he caught hold of

her hands and pulled her to his chest. I held my breath in suspense and fear. But. . . No. . . What did I see ? . . .

Overcome with dread and wonder I began to run and stopped under the mango tree. My heart was beating loudly ; my ears were tingling ; my whole body was shaking ; and my tongue was parched.

For a long time I sat there, frightened, unable to understand anything. I closed my eyes and concentrated, then I opened them and thought. But I still could not understand. Why can I not understand so many things ? In the hot and silent noon I struggled with my problems until I was exhausted. But I could not solve a single one of them. I felt like crying as if I had been thrashed.

Genda walked down the steps of the veranda gaily. I knew that she could give me the answer to my problems, She used to tell me many things.

"What happened ?" I asked impatiently.

"Nothing," she said with sly coquetry. But soon we were sitting in a corner trying to understand my "mysterious" things.

"But why, after all ?" I thought, when I had heard all that she had to say. . . .

Genda went away to iron the clothes, and I sat puzzled as if I had lost my way. I tried to pick small green mangoes to thread them into a garland. But my heart was not in it. I tried to complete the flower-bed I had started yesterday ; I visited my favourite bush in the garden ; I tried to find out where the spotted hen had started laying eggs. But I felt so tired of everything that I could not play at all. I just wanted to close my eyes and dream, dream that I was a little bride, and lost in the world of my dream should never come back to reality. . . What else could I do ? My life by contrast with Genda's was so sad.

I was awakened from my reverie by the sound of Meva's footsteps. A sudden thought swept over me like a wave. A dim ray of hope gleamed before my eyes. Concealing my face behind my hands I fell flat on the

ground hugging it.

"Tut, tut, tut, you are lying on the ground. Get up."

I felt as if someone was trying to raise me up and I would not move. Now someone was tickling me. . . But. . . No. . . . "Get up, or I will tell Brother that you are spoiling your clothes," he threatened me, and remained standing at a distance like a log.

With great indifference he was peeling the bark off a twig.

"Are you going to get up or should I really report you?" And he began to walk towards the house. I felt thoroughly annoyed.

"Swine! Who are you to report me?" I screamed, and threw a stone at him.

"All right," he said. "Wait and see how you will be punished. You walk about in the sun all day and spoil your clothes rolling in the sand. And if someone says anything. . . Well, wait and see." And he walked away, rubbing the hurt on his knee.

"He is so sour," I said to myself. "He never talks pleasantly. He is a . . ."

I was so thoroughly fed up that I pulled out all the jasmine grafts he had planted after hours of labour. "That's what he deserves," I said, and tearfully walked in back to the house.

There was no one to sympathize with me. Brother never took any notice of me; and Mother never fondled me. The result was that I became very self-willed and peevish. I began to quarrel with everyone, and would roam about aimlessly.

When Elder Sister came home she saw the condition I was in and decided to take me away with her. I was grieved at the thought of parting from Genda, but the prospect of a journey made me forget everything.

Within two years, Genda, Brother, Meva, the whole world of the past, became a dream. When I came back things were completely changed. Brother had been sent away to Delhi; and his room had been turned into a

guest-room. Meva Ram had died of pneumonia. But I almost fainted with delight when I learnt that Genda was a mother. When I expressed my joy, however, I was severely reprimanded. I could not understand why. I overheard this conversation :

"She tried her best. . . but it was all useless . . ." I could not hear what else the maidservant said.

"He was going to kill it. . ." said Mother. "I immediately packed him off to Delhi. These low-caste women always try to hook gentlefolk . . ." And in spite of holding my breath and straining my ears I could not understand anything beyond this.

"Genda's child !" I repeated to myself over and over again with wonder and delight as I lay in bed. "But this child . . . after all . . ."

"It is lucky that your master did not come to hear of it," I heard Mother's voice again, "otherwise I don't know what would have happened. That is why I packed him away so hurriedly . . ."

Suddenly it dawned upon me. So, that was it. I understood now. And the whole past drifted before my eyes like a moving picture. But the thought of Genda's child filled me with impatience and joy. I was dying to see it. I began to see pictures of a tiny child, like the one I had seen in the train. A delicate child, but so lovely. There is not one child in our house ; and no guest brings one either. I felt I was in love with Genda's child. In the dark I felt soft little hands caressing my neck and chin. I lay still lest I frightened those soft fingers away from me if I moved.

The whole night I dreamed of children. Hundreds and hundreds of them with strange faces. Some were like Genda, some like me and others still like Brother. And some were like the dead Meva Ram, ever so many of them. They wriggled and threw their arms about. Children without hair ; children with soft hair like down ; with lovely round heads. Little hands everywhere, like millions of particles of sand spread all over the universe.

I could not contain myself any longer, and went to

see Genda's child in the morning.

Genda sat inside her hut with her back to the door. She was startled by the sound of my footsteps and began to stare at me nervously, crouching in a corner. When I went near I saw that a half-naked tiny human being was lying in her lap gaping open-mouthed.

"Ooi, how tiny he is," I said to her, sitting down near her.

Genda had become bony and thin. She looked very worried and turned her face away from me.

"How lovely your child is," I said bursting with happiness, and squatted on the floor. I wanted to take him in my arms. But I don't know why I felt like crying.

"Give him to me, Genda," I said stretching my arms. But she sat dumb, wiping off her tears.

"Why are you crying?" I said, and felt a lump in my throat. "You are the mother of such a lovely child, why should you cry? Give him to me."

She sat there bent forward, drying her tears, and did not even touch the child. I tried to pick him up but could not. He was soft and limp like a piece of flesh.

"Come, Genda, give him to me," I said to her in my old persuasive tone.

She looked at me, searching for something in my eyes. It seemed as if she had found what she was looking for. Gently she lifted the child and gave him to me. He was light and thin and soft like a wisp of cotton.

I sat on the mattress and Genda told me hundreds and thousands of strange things, and how she was thrashed for two months. Fifteen-year-old Genda could not understand many things herself, and could not explain them to me. We always stopped at "Why?" "How?" and "Oh."

When my sister-in-law had given birth to an ugly, dark child who had died a few days afterwards, she had been fed on hundreds of delicacies. But when Genda gave birth to a beautiful child she was thrashed and made to starve. She tasted death before she had the child.



And the child had only two shirts. He shivered with cold and cried the whole night. But sister-in-law always cursed him and prayed for his death. Stealthily Genda had tied a black thread round his toe to protect him from the evil eye. She frankly confessed that she loved the child more than anything in the world. When she talked of Brother her eyes began to gleam with their old customary glow ; and she went on talking of him for a long time.

"He doesn't come to me even during the holidays," she said sadly.

"He will come this year," I said, counting the child's fingers.

"He went to a hill station last year."

"You will write to him ? Won't you ?" she said with sudden hopefulness.

"Yes, yes." I nodded my head in consent.

"Will you write to him that the child sends his love, and that he remembers him very often ?"

"Certainly," I said, although the child could not utter a syllable.

"And write to him to bring a red undershirt like the one which Basanti's child wears. And this. . ." she said, gazing into the distance with desire and memory, "do come in the vacations this year." She said this in a tone of request and prayer. Then she began to laugh softly in a ringing voice.

She went on babbling and talking to me, and I played on with the child's hair.

"See, Genda, he is nibbling at my finger," I said, feeling a ticklish sensation. "He is hungry."

Genda blushed.

"Do feed him or he will begin to cry."

Genda lifted him up from my lap with her thin and bony hands, and hugged him to her breast. Then she hid her face behind her head-cloth and began to laugh.

I watched the lovely little lips of the child with great longing as he pulled at her breasts with deep breaths. And the little mother sat holding him clumsily.

# THE MATHEMATICIAN

*Alagu Subramaniam*

It was a moonlight night, and the people of the town were walking leisurely on the *maidan*. Among them was a newly married couple. They did not walk abreast. The man was half a step in front of his wife. Strictly speaking she should have been at least a step behind her husband, but they were educated and comparatively modern. Hence half a step, which to them was a negligible distance.

Chandram, the husband, taught mathematics to senior students in a high school. His qualifications fitted him to be a lecturer in a university. That was his ambition.

Suddenly Subhadra, his wife, became thoughtful, as if she had recollected an important event.

"What are you thinking?" asked Chandram.

"I'm thinking of the days I spent at the Tamarind School. Look, look there. Do you see that building above those walls?"

"Yes."

"That's my school."

"Oh yes, I remember now. The go-between told my parents that you were an educated girl. Did you learn a lot?"

"Well, I went up to the third form. It was once my ambition to pass the Junior Cambridge examination, but I married you in the meantime."

"Are you disappointed?"

"No, oh no." She laughed, showing her teeth in the moonlight.

"Did you do any mathematics, Pearly Teeth?"

"Yes, I did algebra and geometry."

"Well," said Chandram, "define parallel lines."

"Parallel lines are those which do not meet however

far they are extended."

"That's not quite correct. Your definition is all right for one who knows only elementary mathematics."

"How would you define them?"

"Parallel lines are those which meet at infinity," said Chandram solemnly. "You see, Subhadra, I'm a higher mathematician."

"You're an educated man," commented his wife.

"*You* are educated too," replied Chandram, "but not too much. Excessive education does not befit a woman. You're educated enough to be impressed with my learning, and you're not so educated that you get on my nerves."

Subhadra smiled, showing her teeth which were whiter than the moonlight. Chandram, pleased with himself, wanted to go home. He led the way. His wife accompanied him half a step behind.

During the years that followed Chandram showed more interest in mathematics than in his wife. She resented it, but never expressed her resentment either in words or deeds. She bore it all like a model wife. The husband, however, did not entirely fail in his matrimonial obligations. Subhadra gave birth to children at regular intervals.

Chandram persuaded his wife to believe that he was a genius. His was no ordinary brain, he was different from the others. The poet is devoted to his poetry and the musician to his music. They may be failures as ordinary human beings but you have to judge them in relation to their work. Chandram should be judged in the field of mathematics and not in the social world of ordinary men. He often went for long walks, and when his wife asked him if he had met any of his friends, he would reply: "No, I've been roaming in the realm of mathematics." He quarrelled with his neighbours; he found fault with his servants; he solved the most difficult problems in calculus but made mistakes in summing up tradesmen's bills; he neglected his children.

The husband and wife discussed Chandram the

genius. One day he was a Newton, or at least a Ramanujan. Subhadra boasted about her husband to her friends and requested them to overlook his faults. She simplified life for him by attending to all his needs, and never allowed her children to disturb their father in his work. Chandram acted like an eccentric. He inadvertently wore socks that didn't match, invited friends to his house but was out at the appointed time, and went for long walks in heavy rain. Chandram worked hard, his mind always on the alert for original solutions of problems. He discovered new and quicker methods, and advised his students not to be frightened by complexity in a test paper, but to ponder the question deeply and try and render the puzzle in terms of pure geometry.

But Chandram's attitude to life was not destined to go unchallenged. By winning an international prize for mathematics he became famous and was appointed a Professor at the Colombo University. The varied life of the university was not a suitable field for the new professor's idiosyncrasies. Besides, the members of the staff, in addition to their own curriculum, took an interest in other activities.

Colombo itself was very different from Jaffna, the home town of Professor Chandram. Life was more complex in the city and people knew less of other's private lives. Chandram was jealous of his colleagues. There was Professor Sunderam, who, in addition to lecturing in history, considered himself an authority on music. He presided at most of the concerts. The assistant lecturer in mathematics held discourses on philosophy, while Mangalam, the lecturer in philosophy, was considered a writer. Apart from the adulation he received from his students and the residents of the town for his literary work, Mangalam thought and spoke a lot about himself.

But Professor Chandram could not even indulge in self-praise successfully. In his home town he had roamed in the realm of mathematics, but in the metropolis there were so many who were roaming in the land of figures that it ceased to be original. The people who

mattered were those who came out of their shells and entered the arena of life, in art or in politics. Chandram wished to be recognised in the university and to be given his due place, but as the years went by the staff of the university began to treat him with less and less deference. Chandram found that he was never asked to be the chairman of any committee, or warden of a hostel, or to act as registrar or principal of the college.

His colleagues believed they were not being unfair to Chandram. They, of course, recognised his capabilities, but only as a very clever mathematician. They were prepared to look up to Chandram with awe and respect if he could discover a new theorem like the Binomial and thus justify his claims to genius, or they gave him the alternative of widening his interests and impressing on his colleagues that he was not merely a mathematical apparatus like the slide rule.

During the next few years Chandram became very restless. He was yearning to discover something new, but it was not easy. "My predecessors have discovered everything that is to be discovered, perhaps there's nothing new," he remarked to one of his friends.

"While you're differentiating equations on the blackboard the world is marching past you," his friend commented. "Why don't you take an interest in life? Then people will think you're somebody. As it is you're nothing."

"Don't say that," shouted Chandram. "I'm a genius. Do you realise that? I *am* a genius." He stared at his friend angrily, then controlled himself and added: "Maybe you're right. I too feel a pull in two directions; mathematics and the wide world. Still the force of mathematics is stronger."

The professor of mathematics, unlike the other members of the staff did not hold himself aloof from his students. He was rather free with the undergraduates. Sometimes he even made jokes about himself or his dozen children. One day when it rained heavily and the water began to leak through the tiles, Chandram said: "In the honours class there are only a few students, I could ask

them to come home, but with you intermediate students who number a hundred I can't possibly do that because I already have an intermediate class at home." In the course of a lecture on Permutations and Combinations he would ask: "In how many different ways is it possible to take two of my boys and two of my girls across a stream?"

The undergraduates and post graduates naturally did not keep themselves aloof. They joined their professor in the fun. Some became free and easy with him, others even overstepped the limit.

Chandram gave his students an excellent training in mathematics. He held tests frequently, and he chose lunar days for them so that while walking in the moonlight he might meditate on some of the original solutions of his students. At one of these tests Chandram himself was present, though usually he asked his assistant to preside. Chandram was fantastically dressed and had forgotten to comb his hair. He looked like an eccentric musician. During the test he paced up and down the room supervising. He noticed that every student was hard at work except one whose paper looked blank. You cannot bluff in mathematics. You either solve the problems or walk out of the hall.

Chandram also noticed that every time he looked at this particular student he seemed frightened, like a startled deer. The professor went up to the pupil, whose paper was bare except for two lines. Even these the undergraduate covered with his palm as the professor approached him. Chandram forcibly pushed the student's hand away. The top line was now visible, and it read as follows:

Prof. Chandram. . Mathematics—Infinity.

Chandram smiled happily, then began to pace the room again. Soon he mounted the platform and strutted about like a peacock. He was pleased with himself. "Newton, Ramanujam, Chandram. Chandram, Newton, Ramanujam," he repeated the names. A sudden thought flashed across his mind as he descended the platform. He asked the pupil to show him the second line. The

latter turned pale and folded his book. Chandram told him it was improper to do that and ordered him to hand over the file. The professor read :

Prof. Chandram..Mathematics—Zero.

Chandram's face fell. It was such an unexpected blow that Chandram could not even regain enough composure to scold the student. He walked about like a man who had lost all his possessions. He felt like a paralytic in a room full of energetic and vital people. The metropolitan university had reduced him to this state.

The light from the full moon spread itself like a white sheet over the *maidan* adjoining the university. People were not heavily dressed as during the day. Light shawls were carelessly thrown over the bare shoulders of men, and translucent muslins held the soft contours of their wives. Subhadra, standing half a step behind her husband, loosened her jacket and let the air wander over her breasts, when she was suddenly called by her husband.

"Where are you?" he cried.

"I'm just behind you."

"What's Professor Chandram plus mathematics?"

Subhadra was taken aback. She was not familiar with the term 'infinity.' Her knowledge of mathematics did not go so far. But she knew that mathematics, together with her husband, was something immeasurable. Subhadra used her own method of description.

"Well," she replied, "it's something greater than this world and the oceans."

"Splendid," said Chandram, "your description is wonderful." He looked at her affectionately and fondled her. Subhardra, having been taught that a woman should maintain strict modesty in public, even with her husband, resisted.

"I was not doing anything," said Chandram defensively. "I was only testing the quality of the muslin." He gave his wife a sly look.

"My husband is behaving strangely to-day,"

thought Subhadra. "No, oh no," she immediately corrected herself, "he's a genius, that's why. . . ."

"Subhadra!"

"Yes, Professor?"

"Now, tell me, what's Professor Chandram minus mathematics?"

"That's easy," commented his wife, as her lips curled with a smile: "Well, my dear Professor, you're nothing without mathematics."

Subhadra expected her husband to be delighted at her answer and express his appreciation of her muslin dress. She was surprised to find him reacting differently. Chandram abused his wife, threw his hands in the hair and became hysterical.

A small crowd soon collected around the professor. They all looked like shadows in the moonlight. Some said that Chandram had actually gone mad, others that it was only a temporary aberration of the mind which now and again afflicted talented people, while the rest believed that he was performing the cosmic dance of Siva.

Some friends of Subhadra took her in their charge. Chandram broke through the crowd, ran to the Principal of the college, and demanded replies to his two questions. The demand was accompanied by emphatic gestures. The Principal had no answer to give, became speechless, and was genuinely frightened. His wife began to scream. Her husband retained enough composure to send for the servant and ask him to call a taxi.

They experienced great difficulty in removing Chandram. The servant finally overpowered the professor and put him in the taxi. While the servant held Chandram to his seat the Principal got in and instructed the driver to drive them to the Mental Hospital. Through the windows and in the moonlight he saw Mrs. Chandram being led home by a group of women. Chandram shouted for his wife. "You can't see her now," said the Principal in a commanding tone.

"All right," replied the professor, "doesn't matter, I'll meet her at infinity."



A cloud covered the moon. The road no longer looked like a white sheet. Chandram became more violent ; and despite the darkness the driver drove furiously to the Mental Hospital.

# ONE DAY

*Jugal Kishore Shukla*

The eastern sky became grey, changed to pale white and then to a blood red. Cranes flew in files across the sky.

Soft rays of the morning sun fell on the high tops of houses on either side of the street.

Rubbish, scraps of paper and bits of straw which littered the road gave it the appearance of a sleepy girl, half awake on her bed, with sticky eyes and tresses falling over her face.

With their *dhoties* rolled up to the knees, naked to the waist, healthy villagers and their wives whose waists swayed rhythmically under the weight of fresh vegetables which they carried on their heads, were going towards the bazaar.

The bourgeois gentlemen were walking briskly, sticks in their hands. No *ekka* or cart was visible, or motor cars hooting at the lethargy of these primitive conveyances.

Beggars, blind and disabled, adorned the bazaar by spreading their rags for alms. A blind, bearded hunchback begged at the busy crossing in a touching and pitiful bass.

“Give in the name of God ;  
Give in the name of Allah.”

His appeal without the usual accompaniment of the din of the market echoed solitary, evoking strange forebodings in one's heart.

After a while the market became busier. A noisy iron-tyred *ekka* drove past the shop of Ghazi, the fruit-seller, grating harshly against the eardrums.

It disturbed Pachkaurie in his deep slumber underneath the projecting platform of the fruit-sellers shop, where he lay huddled up. He straightened out the

snake-like coil of his body with a yawn and gazed intently at the *ekka* driver as though he was going to swallow him up through the only eye he possessed.

All night long he had been lying there like a corpse, on the straw unpacked from baskets of fruit. Although the tiny dark and dingy basement was colonized by mosquitos, it was kept cool throughout the night by the underlying drain. It stank, no doubt, but that could not be helped.

"... Yes, last night's toddy was great. These damned Swarajists go about preaching against drink, the sweet, lovely drink which kills all care. . hum, the bedfellows of their own mothers. If we too had enough to eat and no worries, we could never have wanted any money for drinks. It is our hard earned money and we shall spend it as we like. It's none of their business how we spend it," grumbled Pachkaurie as he rubbed off the white scum which had settled in a corner of his mouth during the night.

Now that the effect of the last night's toddy had passed off, the odour of rotting fruit and straw proved unbearable. And just at that moment, with his mouth covered with a soiled rag, came the sweeper to warn Pachkaurie to leave. Then suddenly he recollected yesterday's blow which Ghazi had given him for sleeping there in spite of his warnings.

Thank God, to-day Ghazi had not yet come to open the shop. His back ached; like a quadruped Pachkaurie crept out on all fours. He picked up his basket and a torn sheet of dirty cloth which formed all his possessions, cursed the loin-cloth which had become loose in the night as he tightened it, fastened the purse which contained a few coppers around his waist, and was soon on his legs to go to the public latrine, situated in a neighbouring by-lane. He carried the upturned basket on his head. On the way Pachkaurie saw Bharosé, his acquaintance and a young coolie like himself. He was coming towards him and on his head was the luggage of a Babu who had just got down from an *ekka*. The Babu's hair was dishevelled and his eyelids were heavy

with sleep, which showed that he was coming from some railway journey. At the sight of the lad, Pachkaurie slowed down his pace and adjusted the basket on his head with a cunning twinkle in his eye.

The Babu strode towards Pachkaurie followed by Bharosé. He went past Pachkaurie, and following the Babu, Bharosé approached. Pachkaurie, with a mock-serious air, nodded his head :

“Why did you not salute me, our father’s son-in-law, you goose?” Saying this he gave him a slap on his head and took to his heels. Bharosé, a herdsman by birth, could not swallow the insult. On receiving the slap he began to act like an automaton, worked by an electric button. He put the luggage down on the ground, and closing one of his eyes glared at him with hate. With hands on which gleamed silver bangles, he twisted his moustache and went a few paces forward as if to strike Pachkaurie. By this time Pachkaurie was disappearing round the corner, jeering at Bharosé, making vulgar signs and shouting abuse.

Bharosé pointed his fist menacingly at the disappearing enemy and threatened to thrash him when he got hold of him. Just then he satisfied himself by calling Pachkaurie’s mother and sisters all sorts of names. Finding Bharosé quarrelling, the Babu threatened to engage another coolie. Afraid of losing his job, Bharosé took up the load and followed the Babu, talking to him in a flattering manner to appease him.

At the tap near the public latrine, coolies, labourers, cartmen and beggarly vagabonds were busy at their toilet. Some were brushing their teeth with fresh twigs of *neem*, others were queuing up for latrines, while a few were singing the songs which they had heard the previous night at the *Nautanki* <sup>(1)</sup>, and were making gestures with their hands in imitation of the dancing girls. Pachkaurie entrusted his basket to a coolie of his acquaintance, and borrowing his mug went to the latrine. Settling down there he began to calculate the wages he had earned

(1) *A popular dramatic performance*

during the past week.

Thanks to the tea-party the week had been a lucky one. "One rupee, four annas and one pice extra—lucky, eh! But how is it that I have only these thirteen pice left?" he asked himself.

He put the coins on the ground and started counting them. "This anna is definitely a counterfeit. Here are the nine pice. . ."

Then he tried to recollect what he had spent during the week. "Four annas spent on oats and salt, six pice per day on toddy, one pice for. . .hmm. . . the total comes to one rupee and one pice. But I forgot to add three pice spent on *bidis* and tobacco. . ."

The accounts were correct and there remained enough money for the day's drink.

He began to work out a plan for disposing of the bad coin, but someone knocked loudly at the iron door from outside and startled him. He came out and washed his hands, a sticky wisp of straw still clinging to his hair. Returning the mug to its owner, Pachkaurie picked up his basket. Then he turned to a man with closely cropped hair and asked :

"Well, Jokhu! How much did that swine of a merchant pay you yesterday?"

Jokhu was a short-statured, stocky fellow of about forty. There were tattooed pictures of Hanuman the monkey god and of a butterfly on his wrists. A partridge moved restlessly to and fro in a cage which was kept by his side, while he dozed, half-naked, reclining on a big stone.

Pachkaurie's inquiry nettled the man. He turned red. His nostrils dilated with anger and he burst out : "You, it's you, I know the likes of you ; you have spoilt our chances of earning good wages by your competition."

The veins on his neck seemed to swell as he went on snarling : "You bed-fellows of you own mothers ! You are willing to carry a load for just three pice or even for two, you cursed beasts ! It was you the other day who offered to carry that luggage for three pice when I was

demanding four and snatched my bread from my mouth. Now, you bastard, you have the face to ask what he paid me. You swine. . ."

On hearing this violent abuse Pachkaurie lost his temper. Jokhu had stolen the souvenir his sister had given him.

It happened this way. One day when business was very slack all the coolies were idle and smoked a hookah by turns. When Pachkaurie's turn came to take a puff, he inclined his head and sucked hard at it. Just then Jokhu moved his hand furtively towards his turban in the folds of which Pachkaurie kept his memento. Pachkaurie did not feel the loss at the time, but discovered it later.

Pachkaurie had never married nor had he made friends with women. His sister had been the only woman to help him in distress. Now she was dead and to lose her souvenir made him feel terribly lonely.

The memory of that theft made him still more angry. Infuriated, he rushed at Jokhu and the two closed in combat. The cage of the bird was knocked down by a kick and rolled down the pavement. Pachkaurie's turban got loose and fell from his head.

A crowd gathered and the atmosphere became tense. But as such events were common occurrence nobody tried to interfere until a policeman from the crossing came brandishing his baton. He began to dust their backs with his baton and threatened to have them both sent to jail.

Jokhu's friends, however, intervened and dragged him away.

Pachkaurie wandered about aimlessly for a time, picking quarrels with dirty sweetmeat sellers as he tried to steal their sweets. It was past ten when he reached the bazaar. He went to the man who sold gram fried in oil near a tall building which was under construction. He had just ordered gram worth half-a-pice, when a well-dressed young man with his wife, children and dog came along in a car. "Get away. . ." he shouted at Pachkaurie.

But experience had taught Pachkaurie that in spite of their growling they needed a coolie. Ignoring repeated rebuffs he followed the car to the draper's store where it came to a halt. The well-dressed gentleman and his wife got down while the children and dog remained in the car. As he got down the man saw Pachkaurie following him and he shouted again : "Get away, you rascal !"

It was no use waiting any longer. Panting, Pachkaurie looked enviously at the dog in the car, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and disgusted, retraced his steps.

The gentleman and his wife climbed the steps of the shop muttering : "These awful beggars. The Government ought to do something to stop this pest."

Meanwhile Pachkaurie had returned to the gram-vendor's stall and was eating his breakfast of gram mixed with sour sauce. As if he were obliging the man by buying half-pice worth of gram, he inflicted upon him the story of Jokhu's attack on him.

When Pachkaurie was washing his hands at the tap after his breakfast an obstinate fly persistently harassed him by settling on his back. He was so annoyed that he struck hard at it and hurt his back in doing so.

He was just going to light a *bidī* when he heard someone calling : "Coolie. . . Any coolie here ? Damn the scoundrels ! You see, they pester you the whole day and just when you need them, they are nowhere to be seen. . ."

It was a pot-bellied grocer speaking in disgust to his customer who was waiting for a coolie to carry his purchases. In a short while a bunch of coolies appeared on the scene and struggled to get to the man first. A regular stampede ensued. Pachkaurie also ran, pushing and exchanging blows. As he ran, the muscles of his leg seemed to swell, showing varicose veins. There was no covering on his body except the scanty loin-cloth, and the only eye that he possessed had red threads in it. Seeing the coolies racing towards him the customer moved aside.

Pachkaurie ran neck and neck with another coolie. Both of them were ahead of all the others. When they

reached the shop, Pachkaurie elbowed his rival. But he was a tall stalwart fellow. He readily balanced himself and gave such a push in return that Pachkaurie fell flat on the ground and began to howl. His ribs seemed to heave like bellows. A noisy crowd soon gathered round him. The grocer flared up at this rowdyism.

"Did you see Babujee? What perfect scoundrels these fellows are. The constable, you see, will come and blame me for all this. These vagabonds should be flayed alive and be sprinkled with salt," he cried at the top of his voice.

A police constable in the distance saw the crowd and started towards it, but in the meanwhile, the grocer had succeeded in hustling the crowd away. In spite of this, the policeman came and began to belabour the coolies. The two culprits were about to be led away, but the timely intervention of the Babu Sahib saved them. The Babu Sahib's philanthropy helped Pachkaurie to get the load. He lifted it and carried it on his head. He limped as he walked.

"Bah! Did you see, Jiawan, what a crafty old knave that one-eyed fellow is. He managed to secure the job by feigning tears," observed a young coolie, belching loudly and spitting on the road as he crossed to the other side.

While Pachkaurie was crossing the road with the load on his head, he heard a bicycle bell behind him. Before he could get away it came down upon him and the front wheel struck his leg. An angry man wearing a Gandhi-cap had to get down from the bicycle and he poured forth a shower of curses at Pachkaurie for causing obstruction.

And so the day wore on—a long dull procession of pain.

The lamps had been lighted. Having boozed at the toddy shop Pachkaurie walked back towards "Uchwa" with unsteady steps.

Rows of dark hovels, crudely thatched and with a narrow mud verandah in front of each, displayed the



architectural glory of "Uchwa." It was peopled by coachmen, coolies, pedlars and menials. The place was a rendezvous for Pachkaurie and others of his kind in the evenings. It was full of bustle and life. Sometimes they played cards or someone sang to them the epic tale of Alha-Udal :

" The swords were clashing,  
The sabres were flashing. . . "

Sometimes Pachkaurie just stayed and listened to these stories ; at others he flirted with a widow who lived at the end of the row of houses.

That day the inhabitants of the place were sitting in a circle as usual in front of the verandah smoking the hookah. An earthen kerosene oil lamp sent up a dark thick line of smoke, which curled above the red flame and ultimately vanished in thin air. In a hovel nearby an old man was coughing hoarsely. When the coughing fit subsided he asked his daughter : " Tirasiya ! Give me a little water, my dear." And then he resumed coughing again.

As soon as he arrived at the place, Pachkaurie began to blow through a paper rolled up into the shape of a flute, producing a tremulous note in imitation of some English band. His single red eye-ball was visible through the drooping eyelid.

" Brother Jagbandan, didn't you hear the news. . . " And he looked angry, " Jokhu fell out with me. . . "

Suddenly he became violent and shooting his hand forward shouted in drunken rage : " By my life ! Don't call me a man if I don't take my revenge by shedding his blood. It's by you, Jagbandan brother, that I swear—" Pointing towards him he cried : " Brother, you are my master, my all ; I never keep anything from you. . . Firstly that son of a devil had stolen, yes stolen, my dead sister's keepsake. Secondly, he quarrelled with me over a trifle and abused me. Brother Jagbandan ! I stand here and swear by you and by all present here—and I fall at your feet. I tell you truly," he added, slapping his chest, " If I don't kill that rogue, I am not a true

son of my father. The lover of his mother. And what about me? I care a brass button for death. That's a fact. It's no joke brother! May his father be damned and mine, too? What do I care? Let the devil take them. . ."

Pachkaurie babbled on, reeling with drunkenness. Bharosé arrived just then.

"There, there he comes, the bosom friend of that dog." He shouted and rushed to strike him, but staggered and fell down. He kept muttering to himself incoherently. His face was pale and lifeless, like wax. He started vomiting.

The old man next door coughed. "Khon-khon, khon, Kha-Kha-Kha. . .Tirasiya! My daughter, give me some water."

People carried Pachkaurie to the widow's room. She was annoyed by this new worry and grumbled as she got the bed ready. "The cur, why must he choose my place for his grave?"

Pachkaurie vomited again with a gurgle. The widow cursed loudly, and kicked him in the back.

Thinking her to be his sister, Pachkaurie moaned inarticulately: "Sister dear, come sister. I'll come with you, Sister. Why did you leave me alone, oh why did you leave me alone. . ."

Then he began to cry, as if he were deeply hurt by his sister deceiving him by going away to the other world without taking him with her. A dog howled outside in the deserted lane. The shrill, sharp wail pierced right through the quivering heart of the dark night.

There was a rustling sound of something struggling behind the heap of fuel wood, straw and other odds and ends lying in the room. A rat squeaked as if struggling for life. A cat was ready to spring on it.

Pachkaurie raised his chest with a deep sigh and dropped down again in sickly stupor.

The coughing next door began again and then died away. "Ah, Tirasiya, my daughter, water. . .Khon-

Khon-Khon. . . .”

Someone banged a door and dreadful silence reigned again. The day was done . . .

## THE PARROT IN A CAGE

*Attia Habibollah*

She awoke to find the stars still in the sky. On the beds, on either side, the shrouded figures lay still.

Her mother was breathing heavily ; and in its iron cage at the foot of her bed the parrot was robbed of its brilliant colours by the grey light. Across the courtyard under the thatch, the man-high clay jars took upon themselves a monstrous shape. For how many years had they stood there, grain stored in them ? A cock crowed, false herald of an illusory dawn. A dog barked in the village street. She closed her eyes again.

The sun was hot on her face, and she woke startled. Her heart sank at the thought of morning prayers and her mother. The old woman's eyes were fixed on her, unblinking, deep among a thousand wrinkles. She swayed slightly forward and back, as she sat on her bed, and her right hand moved swiftly over the beads of the rosary. Her lips, a thin betel reddened line separating the hollows that were her cheeks, moved silently. The red of the betel had run down the wrinkles on either side of her mouth. All day she sat there overlooking the small square of the courtyard, the thatched verandahs around, the way in and out of the rooms beyond them. She had sharp eyes and a sharp tongue, and the discovery and correction of mistakes was a pastime now in her old age and the main reason for existence.

The girl lowered her eyes hurriedly before the fierce look of the old one's, but she had to hear the voice, " Ya Allah ! so you are awake ? Is it not time yet to sleep on ? The dog is still asleep and must you wake ?" . . . .

The parrot squawked and hopped round and round its cage. The girl got up and kicked the pariah dog by her bed. It opened an eye and attempted to wag its tail. Kicks were the only recognition of its unhappy existence.

She washed and prepared to say her morning prayers. The voice went on "And must you pray? Pretend to God you fear Him so? Get up at midday to say your *Fajr* <sup>(1)</sup> prayers?"

She stood in prayer and bowed and prostrated herself in the ordained manner, not comprehending what she said. In the background of her mind raced thoughts far removed from prayer. When the Arabic prayer was over, she sat long over her personal prayers.

The parrot interrupted her meditations with repeated cries "*Nabiji bhayjo imddad Allah ki.*" <sup>(2)</sup>

The old mother looked at the bird with love and pursed her mouth with tender wordless sounds, adding in between "Mitthoo, my son; Mitthoo, my dear. How his wings have grown! I must cut them. How can I remember when there is so much to remember?"..

The girl went hurriedly into the dark room to comb her hair. She passed her widowed sister sitting as ever on the durri-covered bed cutting betel nut. Kut-kut-kut-kut, and there was a rustle as she passed her hand through the growing heap. It went on all day long.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"Mother said 'let her sleep on. I want to see how long she can sleep,' " and she spat into the spittoon by her bed. Her teeth were blackened and moist with red betel juice.

In the mud and brick room it was dark. There were bundles and tin boxes in the corners. A small mirror hung on a nail above the wooden shelf on which were the comb and *kajaldani*. <sup>(3)</sup> There were some Quranic texts hanging on the mud walls; and a few faded photographs of relatives from the city. One girl wore a sari, short sleeves, her head was uncovered and there was a flower in her hair. When *she* wanted to wear flowers she wore them secretly hidden under her thick shirt.

Her mother called her as she came out. "Now you have finished adorning yourself and are rested, will you

(1) *Early Morning.*

(2) "*O Prophet of God, send me His help.*"

(3) *Vanity Box.*

care to make *pan*<sup>(1)</sup> for your brother? The man is waiting. And you brother would like something cooked today for some friends who are coming. Tell the man to choose a young fowl from outside and send it. What are you waiting for? Still heavy with sleep?"

She sat to make *pan* and her fingers were stained. In the courtyard, the sweeper woman was busy sweeping, enveloped in a light cloud of dust. Her child sat in a corner, his opium-drugged eyes staring vaguely while flies hovered over them and his dribbling mouth. The dog nosed around, its tail between its legs.

Near the clay fireplace the old maid crouched lighting the fire. The wood smoked, and the wall and roof of the thatch around the fireplace were black. She wiped her tearful eyes and nose on the edge of her shirt.

From beyond the outside door someone called, "*Bhishti, Bhishti*".<sup>(2)</sup> and pushed aside the heavy wooden door which creaked in protest. He lifted the curtain of matting and walked in, swaying, with one copper vessel on his head and one under his arm. He wore thick silver bangles and his face was covered with a bright red-and-yellow check handkerchief. The water gurgled as it poured into the metal jar.

The girl sent the maid outside with the *pan*. She took the parrot's cage and poured water over it to clean it, cautiously opened the little window and drew out the small vessels to clean them, and fill them with food. The bird tried to peck her fingers, then hopped from side to side. The old woman's shrill voice came monotonously: "Mitthoo my son, Mitthoo, my dear."

When she put the food into the cage, the parrot pecked again. She poked it viciously with the iron pin that secured the window. It squeaked and flapped its wings. "Mitthoo, my son," she said sweetly and carried the cage back to the foot of her mother's bed.

It was hot near the fire, and the heat of the sun was also growing. From across the courtyard she heard her mother scolding the maid, questioning about the food,

(1) *Beet Leaves.*

(2) *Water Carrier.*

talking to the parrot. In her head was a sound as of a wasp's buzzing, and a pain as of a knife jabbing.

The sun blazed from above. The food was cooked and eaten ; the stores for the night weighed and put aside. The old mother slept while the maid pressed her feet sleepily. The girl went into the room. It was cool and dark. Her sister sat inside still cutting the betel nut. She lay on her bed and closed her eyes, but the sound of the kut, kut, kut, kut, was hammering on her ears and she wanted to scream. But sleep came at last, like a soothing wave.

In the evening the school teacher came as usual after her day's work was done. She had a quiet voice, peaceful eyes, silver hair, and her long shirt was a sign she had been to Mecca. The mother and the teacher talked, and through their fingers the beads of the rosary passed rapidly. Sometimes their lips moved silently in prayer together with the beads ; sometimes they talked of worldly things, while their hands moved over the beads.

The girl sat and sewed or made more *pan* for the brother. She heard snatches of conversation, which revolved always and eternally on the same subject :

"No proposals? Where were the men who had both blood and money? And all this talk of education! As if it were not enough that a girl could read the Koran and say her prayers. No, she must be like a city hussy and learn to write letters—letters perhaps to strange men. . . ."

And always there was the proud assertion : "I have not spoilt her, nor coddled her, but made her familiar with hard work and hard words."

"Oh yes, yes, I have nothing but praise. . . ."

The parrot screeched, one discordant rasping screech after another. "What are you doing? The parrot has not been fed yet? Mitthoo, dear Mitthoo! Must I remind you every day? And be careful. You are so forgetful ; do not forget to lock the cage.

The girl took the cage into the garden beyond her room. There was no order or beauty in the closed-in space which was the garden. A few rose bushes wilted

under layers of dust, and flowers were smothered by fallen leaves. Flower-beds were overgrown with weeds and grass, though there were one or two rows of balsam and yellow *Gaynda*. By the high mud wall grew a wild bush with red berries. Beside it were a few bricks. The girl stepped on them to look over the wall.

Beyond the wall stretched the fields far into the distance where tall, regularly placed trees marked the road to the city. The sun was setting behind a grove of guava trees and one could look towards it without being blinded. There was quietness in the atmosphere. Even the village dogs were not barking. Suddenly, disturbed, perhaps by the keeper, there flew from the grove little green parrots with a whirl of wings and much screeching, darting towards the luminous horizon.

The parrot in the cage hopped and shrieked in response. The girl opened the cage, cleaned out the stale food, put in fresh food and closed the window. She looked for the iron pin on the ground. "Now be careful and shut the cage. . . ." She reminded herself. The parrot was pecking at her fingers through the bars. . . . "Be careful. . . ." Suddenly it was out on the bush with the red berries. It was on the wall, among the guava trees. Then it was flying into the heart of the sun. She heard its mocking voice, "*Nabiji bhayjo, imddad Allah ki !*"





## THE SWALLOWS

*K. Ahmed Abdas*

Although his name was Rahim, "the kind," few people were so cruel as he. The whole village lived in dread of him. He showed no pity either to man or beast. One day when the iron-smith's son tied thorns to the tail of Rahim Khan's bullock, he beat him until the boy began to bleed. People said he had no fear of God: he spared neither innocent children nor dumb animals and would surely go to hell. But all this was said behind his back. No one dared open his mouth in front of him. One day Bundu made the mistake of saying: "Why do you beat the children so, Rahim Khan?" At this Rahim fell on the poor fellow and thrashed him so hard that everyone in the village was stricken dumb and abstained from talking to him lest he should get annoyed. Some said he had lost his reason, and suggested he should be sent to the lunatic asylum. But no one had the courage to speak out openly.

The whole village gave up speaking to him. But he remained unconcerned. He went in the morning to his field, carrying the plough on his shoulder. He did not greet anyone on the way. When he reached the field he talked to his bullocks whom he had named Nathu and Chhiddu. While ploughing, he would shout:

"You, Nathu, why don't you walk straight? Do you think your father will come to plough this field? And you, Chhiddu, what has come upon you?"

Then he would start lashing them with the whip. The backs of the bullocks were sore with the beating.

When he came home in the evening, he shouted at his wife and children. If there were no salt in the lentil or vegetables he beat his wife. If one of the children did some mischief he hung him upside down and lashed him with the same whip he used on the bullocks until the

child became unconscious. Thus every day something terrible happened. Every night the neighbours would hear Rahim Khan swearing at his wife or children, who howled and cried in pain, but they could do nothing to stop him. No one had the courage to intervene for fear of being thrashed.

The wife always looked half dead with constant beating. She was only forty but looked sixty. The children suffered the wrath of their father as long as they were small. When the eldest was twelve he ran away after being beaten one day and did not return. An uncle of his lived in a village nearby and gave the boy shelter. Rahim's wife one day made bold to suggest : "If you happen to go to Hilaspur, please bring Nuru back." She had hardly said this when the devil seemed to get possession of him. "I should go to bring that bastard back!" he shouted, shaking with rage. "I tell you if he returns I shall kill him."

The boy, however, had no intention of returning into the jaws of death. Two years later the younger son also ran away and found shelter with his brother. His wife alone was now left to bear the whole brunt of his wrath. But one day he beat her so mercilessly that even she could no longer endure it. When Rahim Khan was away working in the field, she sent for her brother and left for her mother's house with him.

When Rahim Khan came back in the evening the neighbour's wife mustered courage to give him his wife's message. Contrary to her expectations, he listened to her in silence. Then he went to tie the bullocks up for the night in the yard. He was sure that his wife would never come back to him.

Returning from the yard, he entered the hut. There was nobody inside. Only a cat was miaowing pathetically. He caught hold of the cat by the tail and threw her out. He went to the oven, but it was cold. He felt too lazy to light the fire and cook himself a meal. Without eating anything, he lay down and fell asleep.

The sun had already risen when he woke up the next morning. But he was not in a hurry to go to work. He

milked the goats and drank the milk. Then he filled his hookah and sat down on the bed. By now the sun was flooding the hut. He saw cobwebs hanging in a corner, and decided to remove them. Tying a piece of rag to a bamboo stick, he set about the task. His eyes fell on a nest of swallows in the ceiling. Two swallows were flying in and out of the nest. His first impulse was to destroy the nest. But something held him back. He brought a stool and, standing on it, peeped inside the nest. Two fat little swallows were twittering inside, and their parents were hovering overhead to protect them. He reached one hand towards the nest, but the mother swallow swooped down on him to attack. "What!" he cried, bursting into a nervous laughter, "do you mean to peck my eyes out?" And he came down from the stool. The nest was spared.

The next day he resumed his work. No one in the village talked to him. The whole day he would be busy ploughing or watering the field, or reaping the crop. But in the evening he would return home before sunset. Then he would fill his hookah and, lying on the bed, watch the swallows playing. The two fledglings could fly now. He had named them Nuru and Bundu after his sons. The four swallows were the only friends he possessed in the world. The villagers, of course, still avoided him; but they were surprised that he no longer beat the bullocks. Nathu and Chhiddu were happy. Even the old sores on their backs had almost healed.

Rahim Khan was returning from his field early one day. He met some children playing on the road. The moment they saw him they ran away, leaving their shoes behind them. He cried after them: "Why do you run away? I won't beat you." But in vain. The sky was overcast with clouds. He hurried home. He had hardly tied up the bullocks when the storm burst.

He went inside the hut, closed the door and lighted a lamp. As usual, he put a few crumbs of bread in a niche near the swallows and called out: "O Nuru, O Bundu." But they did not come out. When he looked inside the nest he saw all four of them sitting huddled

up together, their heads buried under their wings. Water was trickling into the nest from a hole in the ceiling.

"If the water keeps on trickling like this," he said to himself, "the nest will be destroyed and the poor swallows will be left homeless." He went out in the rain and, placing a ladder against the wall, climbed up to the roof. By the time he had repaired the hole in the roof he was drenched to the skin. As he sat down on the bed he was seized by a violent fit of sneezing to which he paid no attention. When he woke up the next morning he was burning with fever. There was no one to bring any medicine for him. He lay in that condition for two days.

When the villagers did not see him going to the field for two days, they became curious. Kalu, the petty village official, went to the hut with some of the peasants. They looked into the hut and found him lying in bed talking to himself: "O Bundu, O Nuru, where have you gone? Who is going to give you food to-day?" The four swallows were fluttering near the ceiling.

"The man has gone mad," Kalu nodded his head, meaningfully. "Let us inform the hospital in the morning so that they may remove him to the lunatic asylum."

The next day when the villagers brought a man from the hospital and went inside the hut, they found Rahim dead. The four swallows were hovering overhead.

# THE STARS

*Raja Ratnam*

Now that my Uncle Ram is dead and gone, I can write about him without any fear that he will read this. Not that Uncle would have gone out of his way to read an account of himself even if I had written it during his lifetime. He was a literary ascetic in that he abstained from literature. In fact Uncle read nothing except books on astrology. Nothing else interested him, and I don't think he was even aware that other things besides astrology existed in this or any other world. The world of astrology was good enough for him. He had just peeped into this unique world, liked the looks of it and so had settled there, not caring whether it was the right one or not. Had Uncle chosen a different world, say the world of astronomy, and explored it with the same unshakeable faith and fanatical zeal he had given to his astrology, everyone might have honoured this worthy son of India.

I did mention this to Uncle once. We were trudging across the yellow rice fields one starry night. He looked up at that twinkling world of his.

"Look, my boy," he said dreamily, "up there are our rulers. Every atom of life in this world dances and sings like puppets as they pull the strings. And the starry rulers enact this puppet show according to definite rules. My work is to find out these rules."

"But astronomers say," I began, "that astrology is not a science. And astronomers are clever people; they are well paid and honoured everywhere. Now if you took up astronomy—"

"Astronomers! Pooh! All they can do is look at the stars through their silly telescopes. I don't have to sit and stare at the stars like an amazed child. I study them in my plans and charts and find out what they

are going to do to our lives. Scientific! Bah! If anything is scientific it is astrology because it foretells the future with precision."

And he spat at the rice fields as if those contemptible astronomers were hidden somewhere among them.

Uncle Ram could not talk of anything else but this science of the stars. There was no event or activity of life without the stars having a hand in it. When the farmers of the village talked about rice and rain he would wait impatiently till they had finished. Then, whether they liked it or not, he would give the whole problem an astrological interpretation and end up with a warning. If the farmers were in the mood to listen to him he would do a bit of propaganda in favour of the stars. His discourse was received with appropriate good humour by the farmers, who were not wholly sceptical towards astrology.

When one of the farmers wished to get married or had been blessed with a child, he found it necessary to consult Uncle, who, in turn, consulted the stars. He would take out his astrological almanac and peer gravely at it over his glasses. Then for days he would add, multiply and subtract; for Uncle was not quick at figures. On arriving at results, he would visit his client immediately and say to him: "The sixth of July is an auspicious day for the bride, but not for the bridegroom. The tenth of August is, however, a lucky day for your marriage"

If it were a child's horoscope it meant even more intricate calculations. But Uncle loved every bit of it. It meant that he was planning the life of a human being up to the moment of his death. Uncle Ram, however, called it "predictions", and said that he was only jotting down what the stars told him. Unlike other astrologers Uncle wrote down bluntly the predictions of the stars. If the child were to end up as a criminal he did not seek to cover up this bit of bad tidings in any way.

Uncle predicted woes and happiness with great enthusiasm. He is reputed to have prophesied the first World War and many minor catastrophies besides.

Whenever his predictions came true, Uncle would talk of them for weeks and months on end.

"Have you heard of Annamal's son?" he would ask of everyone he met. "He was kicked into a well by a bull and is seriously injured. I had warned him of it and had told him that within a few months he would suffer an accident from fire, stone or water. It's all written in the stars. The poor boy!"

There were many of Uncle's predictions which never came true, and he did not like to be reminded of them. Whenever he was questioned about these unfulfilled prophecies he would say rather impatiently: "I must have made a mistake in the calculations. You know how bad I am at figures. It's my figures and not the stars that have been wrong. In fact I have worked the whole thing all over again and have discovered that the stars do say that the *thing* should have been as has just happened. The stars can never be wrong if your calculations are correct. If the stars are wrong then how did I prophesy the Great War or what happened to Annamal's son, eh? I have been right many times and you all know it."

Auntie Ram did not play the part of the sympathetic wife, who with kind words and constant encouragement should have helped this great scholar in his search for truth. Often at night when she found her husband busy calculating she reviled him abominably.

"You good-for-nothing husband of mine. If only you would spend your time calculating money instead of the stars, we should not be living in this dirty hut and be so poor. If only you would work harder in the fields instead of wasting your time on such rubbish life might be easier for us."

"But, my dear," Uncle would say softly, "we are destined to be what we are and, however much we may try, we cannot defeat the will of the stars."

This logic was answered by a spate of violent abuse and threats: but Uncle did not give up his world of stars.

There was a fat grimy scroll which Uncle consulted frequently. It was his own horoscope, and it had been



written by an astrologer now dead. It seems that Uncle's horoscope was fairly accurate. According to Uncle (and he once showed me this remarkable passage) it was written that he had a partiality towards the stars. But some of the malicious elements in our village propounded a theory that Uncle became an astrologer *after* reading about it in his horoscope.

Uncle read his horoscope often and even made alterations and additions to it in the course of his readings. He was chagrined to find so many discrepancies come to light with the passage of years. In fact, he tended towards the opinion that his astrologer had been quite ignorant of astrology.

Anyhow, this book of predictions influenced Uncle's life and activities very much. Sometimes he refused to venture out of the house for days because his horoscope forbade such foolhardiness. Many a time he had been saved from horrible dangers, thanks to the timely warnings of the stars. Auntie, however, interpreted Uncle's frequent confinement in the house as being nothing more than an excuse to keep away from work in the fields, and spend more time on his astrology.

According to Uncle's horoscope, he was to die at the age of sixty-eight. He had even gone so far as to calculate the time and day of his death. He repeated this grim prediction to every one as if the fulfillment of it would once and for all be an irrefutable proof in favour of astrology. There was something dramatic in the idea that Uncle had to die to establish the truth of his science. Any other person in possession of such a grim fact as the precise time of his own death would have found life a misery of fearful expectancy. Not so with Uncle. His attitude towards the whole affair was that of a fearless and impersonal scientist. He knew he could not escape what the stars had planned for him and, however much he might struggle, the stars would win in the end. Above all, was the knowledge that his death would establish the truth of his one and only love—astrology.

A few weeks before his prophesied day of death Uncle Ram went about taking farewell of his friends and

relatives. At first the village looked upon it as a joke, but Uncle went about it so earnestly that they began to take an interest in his approaching death. Uncle had purchased a fine brown shroud. He sent out invitations to his friends and relatives to be present at his death. After that there was to be a grand feast ; for his death was not to be an occasion for grief but for rejoicing. Was he not by his death to prove the truth of astrology ?

The great day arrived. Between two and five in the afternoon Uncle Ram was to meet Yaman, the God of Death.

He wished to die in the open rice field, so that everybody could witness the logic of the stars. The shroud was resting on a mound of fragrant flowers. He had even brightened up the small, drab field with gay paper banners and festoons. In fact the scene was more suggestive of a wedding than of death. There were two priests to chant appropriate prayers and hymns while Uncle died.

The day was hot and the sky clear. The stars were invisible but were there looking down all the same. Hundreds of people had assembled to see what promised to be a strange phenomenon. Even the sceptical ones had come, with their peculiar smiles. But, thought some of them, what if he should really die ? What then should their attitude towards astrology be ?

The perspiring, excited crowd waited for Uncle.

At half-past one Uncle came direct from the temple. He was dressed in white and was in no way downcast. He smiled and joked with those around him as if he were waiting to catch a holiday train. Some admired Uncle for his calmness and courage. Some were even moved to tears, and all the more so because many had treated him rather unfairly. Auntie too was there by his side. At first she had scolded him for being a fool and called him the usual names. Gradually, because of Uncle's earnestness, she had believed that Uncle was really going to die. Now in the face of his impending death she began to weep loudly. She reproached herself for having treated him so inconsiderately all these years and begged his forgiveness.

A few minutes before two Uncle wrapped himself in his shroud and cheerfully lay down to die. Auntie and many others howled with grief and begged him not to die. Others were afraid. Some did not know what to feel.

Uncle closed his eyes and waited for death to take him away. The priests chanted their prayers and hymns. All waited for the miracle and kept looking at their watches.

The chanting and weeping were kept up for more than three hours. Now and then the priests stopped their chanting to examine Uncle. At such moments everyone held his breath. The priests shook their tired heads to indicate that Uncle was still alive. Past five and Uncle still breathed heavily.

Many of the crowd had gone away, some angry and some laughing their sides out. The sceptical ones smiled with increasing sarcasm.

The priests kept on with their chanting for another hour, thinking that there might have been a slight error in the calculation. Uncle too was convinced that he might have overlooked a vital fraction in his calculation.

However, the chanting and the weeping slowly changed to angry murmurs. They insisted that Uncle should get out of the shroud before it got too dark. Uncle got up at last—it seemed almost like a resurrection—muttering something about “wrong calculations.” When the people hurled insults and abuse at him and his stars, Uncle was unperturbed. Auntie howled, not with grief, but with rage. The angry guests were a little placated after Auntie had given them the dinner as promised. As for Uncle, he went straight to his room to find out why his calculations had gone wrong. Before the night was over he found out that he had actually five more years to live. He announced this heartening news to his guests, who received it sullenly. One of them went so far as to remark rather unkindly: “Yes, yes. We know. But for the stars you might have died.”

Undaunted, Uncle still went round proclaiming that at the end of five years he would die. Whenever someone

made fun of him by reminding him about his "starry blunder" he defended the stars and blamed his weakness at figures. In fact Uncle Ram embraced astrology with greater fervour than ever in the face of so much ridicule and vicious scepticism.

Then one day, two years after the great fiasco, the stars struck him another cruel blow. He was in the midst of his calculations when he died. Auntie found him with his head resting on his horoscope. The heartless stars, to which Uncle had given a lifetime of unselfish service and devotion, had struck too soon. I can imagine Uncle protesting: "No. No. The stars are never wrong. It's I who am wrong. I am so bad at figures. Some undetected flaw . . . a small fraction overlooked in my calculation . . . ."



## WHEN ONE IS IN IT

*Iqbal Singh*

A crowd of unemployed men and women stood waiting in one of the wings of the silk factory owned by Messrs. Khambatta & Khambatta, Ltd. The firm had decided to extend their business by installing a number of new looms, and more hands were needed to work them. A large contingent of the workless army of the neighbourhood, having heard of the projected development, had turned up in the hope of finding work. There were four hundred of these famished, half-naked creatures herded together like cattle ; four hundred human faces, each standing out distinct and separate from all the rest, and yet, perhaps because of their common need, all possessing an uncanny identity of form and expression ; parched, withered, hopeless faces through which the same image of speechless misery repeated itself as in a nightmare procession.

The overseer before whom they had to appear for a preliminary examination sat in a room down one of the several corridors which opened on to the long and narrow verandah where the crowd stood waiting. He called the applicants in, five at a time, through a sullen-looking peon dressed in a grotesque and ill-fitting khaki uniform. After the interview they were let out by the door at the opposite end of the passage and sternly forbidden to linger on the factory premises.

Outside it was raining hard. Like a cosmic menace, heavy clouds hung low over the world of transient things. The chimneys of the adjoining mills were bleak, towering monoliths petulantly belching huge volumes of smoke. The corrugated iron roofs groaned with the burden of rain, but the earth itself was soft, almost tumescent under its caress—though, even in that tenderness there was the tantalising suggestion of an unapprehended

ache. The wind continued driving the showers into the verandah time and again, and the crowd nestled towards the wall in a painful and somewhat repulsive intimacy. The humid, clammy miasma of their hot breaths and odours hovering over the place demolished all distinctions between the past, the present, and the future.

Mirnalni was one of the many who waited for their turn to be called in. She was about thirty ; a slender and fragile but tense and sombre figure. Although the afternoon was chilly, she was perspiring profusely. The moisture exuded by her body seemed to stick to her like gum, causing a curiously disagreeable sensation of being simultaneously hot and cold. She could be seen to shiver from time to time. But within herself, she felt suffocated by the heat of her own body. She could have rent her garments and rushed into the rain to let it quench her anguish.

There were still more than a hundred people in front of her so that she could not hope to be called in for at least an hour. She had been there already nearly two hours ; and all this time she could sense the weight of something unutterably slimy heaving inside her. She would have liked to reject that decaying foreign matter fermenting inside her but felt too weak to make an effort. Ripples of nausea rose like periodic tremors, were caught up by the sensitive tendrils of her nerves, and transmitted to the remotest border-line of her consciousness.

To sustain herself she had to lean heavily against the damp wall. Towards the right side of the entrance to the factory she could make out the shimmering outline of a row of latrines. But the rain seemed to magnify distances ; the place appeared to her to be situated right on the farthest edge of the world. Besides, to go there would have meant losing her place in the queue ; and that was a price she was not willing to pay even for the immense relief that a visit to the latrines might have brought her.

And when one is in it, one is in it all right. . . .

This sickness, however, had not come over her all of a sudden. She had been in that condition for the past two weeks. It wasn't at all an unusual or unexpected occurrence ; it always happened in the third and fourth months. And that to her seemed the worst period of the trial. She was aware that there were other more excruciating pangs ahead of her. But these she found, in a sense, more endurable. Behind their torture there was, indeed, a subtle intangible element of pleasure ; the torture itself was perhaps a kind of pleasure. And there was no trace of slime in those quick sharp curves of pain. It was a crystalline suffering untainted with self-disgust or loathing. It even gave one a strange kind of strength—the strength to delve deeper, deeper into the abyss of pain as far as one could reach, to the culminating point almost at which one's personal convulsions cease to be personal and become identified with the vast throes of the earth's own tormented womb. And with that final crisis, there also came a supreme feeling of release, of consummation. She had known it twice before ; and each time, for some mysterious reason, it had happened in the seventh month. She remembered how, while walking on the edge of a green cornfield one listless afternoon early in spring, she had felt the paroxysm overwhelm her for the first time, and she had staggered back to the village in dire agony. But somewhere at the root of that agony she could still sense the fulfilment of a long-cherished desire. And although she had raved frantically, clutched at the sides of the bed where they had put her, she could not help craving for the travail to be prolonged into eternity. For there was a diabolical ecstasy in these spasms ; an ecstasy which lifted her out of herself, and, for a timeless interval, made her feel as though she were the whole universe—the universe of pain.

Across the dim vision of encumbered anguish, the world of sense and succession was an evanescent vapour. The crowd, the hairy limbs which were almost brushing against her, the distorted heads, and the eyes which looked at her through the restlessness of a fever, became



all vague phantoms fluttering against an eerie twilight. And in that dusk there was no place for the difference of space and time.

A brittle pain which seized upon her, as it were, from outside, wakened Mirnalni from her nostalgic somnolence with a start. It was the man next to her absent-mindedly trampling her toes. She was aggravated to the point of tears.

"Can't you look where you are stepping . . ." she shouted at him in exasperation.

The man turned round to apologise. He looked at her indifferently at first. But the look of indifference soon changed into one of that peculiar greed and hankering for a woman's possession which is for ever throbbing behind the seemingly placid masks of men's faces. For a while he surveyed her as through determining her functional value to him as a woman. She wasn't even remotely beautiful. Her emaciated face was hard and dry; the hair untidy and slovenly. And yet that dry, hard, resentful face had an insidious fascination which grew upon one. There was in it even an undefined girlish charm. Then there were her prominent lips promising mouthfuls of sensual delight. The fragile but delicately contoured hips opened up their own possibilities of ecstatic bliss to the initiate eye. And the breasts were unassertive but definitely tempting in their thinly-veiled nudity. It all evoked that contagious yearning for the touch of feminine softness which, in any case, does not want any great provocation to be roused, whatever be the differences between space and time.

"Didn't mean any harm, sister . . ." he said as a peace offering, but at the same time casting a sly, knowing glance.

She did not answer him; remained motionless and stern as if she were deliberately refusing to recognise him as a man. She resented that sly, knowing glance, but the resentment instead of becoming articulate only hardened her to an impregnable stone-like resistance. She knew exactly what that hankering look of want meant; knew it so well that it had even ceased to perturb

her equanimity and hurt her. Time after time she had witnessed it in men's eyes ; time after time, and every time with an increasingly profound repugnance. But it wasn't a repugnance which implicated her personally in any way. It was just a detached and impersonal feeling, the kind of abhorrence one has for a bad smell that is not one's own. And what she detested most about men was, precisely, this sly manner of approach, at the surface so artful and yet, in reality, so contemptibly and abjectly pathetic—like the leprous beggars parading their ugly sores to attract public attention. Not that she minded having men and giving them what they wanted of her. On the contrary, she knew there was no deep stigma attached to lifting one's legs heavenwards and being oblivious of the tentacles of pleasure and pain.

And when one is in it . . .

Of course, it wasn't always so patently pathetic. At times they would come to her like beasts in fury, cruel with the cruelty of their insatiable hunger. Then she had to be well on her guard, to be in perfect control of herself in order not to let herself be undone by them. On one occasion, she remembered, one of them had actually hurt her in his passion. " You are so hot . . ." he had scowled, gnashing his teeth in his utter impotence to break through the unseen barriers which still separated her from him, " that I could kill you with . . ." And because it was not for him to reach beyond the limitations of space and time, in his frustration he had dug his finger-nails deep into her breasts till she could feel her own hot blood trickling down her ribs. And, though for the moment, being helpless in that bitter embrace, she was afraid he had got the better of her, in the end it was she who held him at her mercy—so completely indeed that had she wished she could have made him go on all fours and dance to her tune like a tame bear. And that was how it invariably turned out to be in the end if one did not allow oneself to be carried away with the deceptive blood of one's breasts.

And, yet, once she had been on the point of being overwhelmed. She could not clearly recollect how and

why it came about. She could only dimly remember that one summer night in a fit of jealousy her husband had tried to strangle her. He appeared to be possessed by a madness ; but it was altogether different from the orgy of excitement in which she had known men to handle her. There was something inhuman about that madness. It was like that of a ghost lurking in the dark and waiting for its chance to overcome one in an unguarded hour. And to her he really had been a kind of ghost, always walking in his own shadow. She could never quite grasp him ; perhaps, didn't even want to, because of some secret dread that he inspired in her. And yet, she could not bring herself to deny him entirely as she could the other men she had known. He was there beside her as a kind of heavy obsession from which she could never shake herself free. That was why even before his hands had closed in upon her throat that night, she had shrieked—the depths of her bowels quivering with terror. It wasn't that she was afraid of death. Even in that critical instant, when she was, in fact, so close to it, the idea of death in her mind was far too vague to make her panic. And then there are always worse things than death. Death is all right even as is birth. What really terrified her was the burden of that presence which was not her own ; which she could not ever hope to understand ; and which, nevertheless, was always casting its unbearable shadow on her being. She dared not face the menace of that otherness. Against it all her defences could avail nothing ; she felt she was being broken under its stress. She had to cry out for help in spite of her will, like a drowning person. Then the people from the neighbouring huts had come to separate them. And as they had led her away from him, she had turned round to look, once. Against the starlight, she could distinguish his silent silhouette standing ominously apart from the darkness which enshrouded him.

Slowly, imperceptibly she was advancing with the queue towards the door leading into the passage. Two men standing in front of her were having a heated argument as to the respective merits of the two rival unions

in the city. The sharp edge of their voices seemed to perforate her brain with a sickening ache. She wished they would cease talking. An old woman with a shrivelled, tottering figure continued snarling at her without a pause, as though she bore her a life-long grudge. They had all come there to find a job ; and the factory required only a limited number. There was an inevitable feeling of tension and hostility in the air, everybody present being a potential enemy of everybody else. Unable to keep it to herself, the old woman seemed to take a perverse delight in foul-mouthed expression of the unuttered grievance of every heart in the crowd. Mirnalni, however, was too sick to protest or retort. Nevertheless, every time the old hag fulminated against her she was reminded of a problem, which, under the strain of her physical misery, she was constantly on the point of forgetting. She had to repeat to herself that she was waiting to find work ; that it was a matter of utmost urgency that she should succeed in her purpose.

She had been in Bombay now ten days without work. So far she had managed to live on roasted gram and sleep on the pavements or under the awning of some shop. But she could not go on in that manner indefinitely. The little money that she possessed had been already spent on paying for the railway journey from Sholapur. If only she could get together enough to rent a room in the proper quarters where she could bring her men, things would not be at all so difficult. As it was, the police took a serious view of all prostitution that was not conducted strictly within the confines of the Municipal regulations. She had made only eight annas in about as many days, which was positively disheartening, considering that she was still under thirty and should fetch a better price in the market. The wife of the gatekeeper in the ginning factory at Sholapur, where she had worked before coming to Bombay, had given her some sound advice on this subject, and, indeed, prophesied a very rosy future for her in the metropolis. "With a body like yours, my dear . . ." she had said, though not without a sense of regret and envy, "you should never

be at a loss in a place like Bombay. And when I say that, I know what I say. Think of all those *seths* <sup>(1)</sup> who have no end of gold. This much I do know : they all like creatures such as you, young and tender. When I was your age . . .” Here she had digressed into somewhat embarrassing personal reminiscence. “A Gujerati merchant kept me as his paramour. Such a sweet little house he rented for me, near Gwalia Tank. You should have seen me in those days, my dear. And the dresses and ornaments he used to get for me ever so often. It was a jolly time I had of it. And when I say that, I know what I say. Then he gave me ten rupees for my pocket money every month into the bargain. And a rupee . . .” she had emphasised, “went a long way in those days. You have no idea, my dear. And my merchant was a nice fellow. A little top-heavy, but quite harmless. Only I had to smack his bottom for him for a while before he could come to it. Then he would be all right. And the way he would tussle with me ! And the way he would scuffle with me ! And when I say that, I know what I say. You wouldn’t believe all this of me, would you, my dear ? But life is a strange thing. And if I hadn’t gone and lost my head. You should have seen me then ! That is why I ask you not to waste yourself here working in the factory. What do you get after toiling the whole day picking the waste—six annas ! That is what I used to give to the sweeper boy who used to come to clean the house. Why shouldn’t you, too, make a fine job of it ? You can go a long way, my dear, if you go the right way about it and don’t go and lose your head as I did. And when I say that, I know what I say . . .”

Far from going a long way, Mirnalni felt that she wasn’t making any headway whatever. The legendary *seths* absolutely refused to appear on the scene with their bags of gold, though for her part, she was quite prepared to whip their posteriors if that should be required of her.

And now these cruel rains had set in. And it

(1) *Merchants.*

seemed as though they would never end. And there was that embryo swelling inside her like a decomposing corpse, swelling. That was how it started growing in the third month. And it seemed as though that malignant process of growth would never end, either. And there were all those waves of nausea breaking at the verge of her senses, always breaking'

But when one is in it . . . .

There were six batches more to go before it would be her turn. A fear which had been persistently knocking at the back of her mind now began to grow on her like an ague. All her faculties were being gradually paralysed. She could feel her nerves becoming numb and inert. She couldn't think clearly or coherently. Supposing, she asked herself, they did not take her on in the factory—what was she going to do then? Her mind was blank. She couldn't see beyond. She was lost in a blind alley of utter hopelessness. The past, the present, and the future were welded together in a phantasmagoria of unavailing despair.

Once or twice she thought she was going to burst into tears in spite of her desperate efforts to control herself. To be oblivious of the grief which was gnawing at her soul, she turned away from her immediate environment. Her eyes like a mist wandered across the grey brick wall engirdling the factory, over the irregular skyline etched out by tier upon tier of houses and factories, and beyond, right to the very edge of the mutilated horizon. The clusters of buildings, the clouds, the empty spaces and distances all seemed to stand out apart from her, in a merciless detachment that terrified her. Once again she found herself scanning the faces in the crowd, almost as if she were supplicating for kindness. But the angry masks which glared at her were proof against all supplications. Mirnalni felt small and helpless, like a minute speck dissolving into the all-pervading pointlessness.

She was trembling precariously on the brink of a bottomless gulf. Behind her there were just endless stretches of loneliness. Somewhere far down the back-

waters of space and time, there was a mirage of dancing stars. They might have been the ghosts of unfulfilled promises of a pain that was pain, and a joy that was joy. But there was no going back. And then, there were always worse things than death. "If you came back here . . ." the man had threatened, shaking her violently, "I'd kill you." It had nearly crushed her, that shaking—for it was so different from anything that she had known before or after. And that alien figure who forever remained wrapped up in his own shadow and never emerged into the open daylight, meant what he said. It was another matter, she could not and did not want to understand what he said, or wanted to say.

"Mirna. . ." he had whispered to her another time in one of those moments of unendurable tenderness. "Promise you won't ever betray me. Be true to me, Mirna. . ." She could not at all make out what was the meaning of that strange demand ; could not bring herself to yield to his fingers, which, with their convulsive caress wanted to transfigure her against her will, mould her naked body into some other shape—not its own. She could only feel resentful and obstinate in her insouciance ; though looking back on those visitant interludes, she wondered if, after all, it would not have been worth while to have made an effort to get to the bottom of his demand ; even to have surrendered herself without reserve to the pressure of his fingers and been transfigured into some form—not her own.

The downpour seemed to have nearly exhausted itself ; the showers were growing milder. The hum of the machine now rose in a gradual crescendo over the drip-drop of the rain ; rose higher and higher till it seemed to pervade the whole universe. Two hundred miles away, in innumerable dry steam-heated chambers, thousands of silk-worms were fulfilling their Karma and being delivered from their bondage to their own wormhood through the painful process of suffocation. Down one of the wings of the factory, women operators fished out the cocoons from one steaming miniature ocean and transferred them into another with prodigious agility. Fila-

ments of scintillating ecstasy were extracted by an elaborate reeling mechanism and wound over reels which were the colour of emerald. Bobbins danced as it were between heaven and earth ; shuttles appeared to fly to and fro from one end of the cosmos to another at a lightning speed. Men, grim and vigilant like so many gods in bronze, stood near the clutches as if in perpetual readiness to pounce upon the handles in case of any emergency, and bring the whole scheme of things and the Wheel of Law to an abrupt end.

It was her turn next. Her problem had assumed the proportions of an hallucination. And there was the weight of the unborn growing, growing. Yet, when one is in it . . . .

Honk ! Honk ! The electric hooter of a lemon-coloured limousine sounded an ominous metallic chord, warning the erring and forgetful pedestrians on the road of life of the inexorable chain of birth and death. As it drove past them, the crowd looked up. But before they had time to capture its streamlined loveliness, it had vanished in some unsuspected curve of Space even as the comets do. Inside the automobile the youthful managing director of Messrs. Khambatta and Khambatta, Ltd., sucked in flame from a long ivory cigarette-holder. As it was at that precise instant the car had swerved to the left with a jerk, a few sparks from the smouldering end of his cigarette fell through the air like meteors ; the carpet underneath was sprinkled with amorphous ash which was intrinsically identical with star-dust. The after-effects of a luxurious lunch and the complicated ritual of after-dinner amorous transports, was, however, by no means intrinsically similar to the nirvanic peace which passeth all understanding. Apart from the peculiarly uncomfortable feeling of indigestion, the youthful director of Khambatta and Khambatta, Ltd., looked distinctly bewildered as though some grave, inscrutable issue were baffling his comprehension. It was that impish mole on the soft white belly of his newly-wedded wife which was puzzling him so. Was it above or below the navel ? He taxed his brain hard to locate it, but



the treacherous mole evaded him. Above or below? Below or above?..He, too, was groping in the dark. And hardly half an hour had elapsed since he had seen her, not in any metaphorical sense but literally, in flesh and blood. He tried to find some explanation for this inexplicable lapse of memory. But even Zend Avesta could not enlighten him as to the cause of this mystery.

Nor was it any more helpful in solving Mirnalni's problem. She would have liked to be endowed with some miraculous hypnotic power in that moment. Instead, she felt that even her ordinary faculties of thought and expression were being mysteriously strangled. A heart was still beating against her bosom, but it wasn't her own. With a disdainful flourish, the peon beckoned them to follow. Three men, the old woman, and herself took the hint. They walked a little way down the passage, silent and anxious, and were finally ushered into the overseer's presence. As they entered the office, the peon ordered them to halt at a safe and respectful distance from the table.

The room was bare and stark. Behind the table they could see the overseer fiddling with his papers. He was a bulky, short-statured creature with a flabby, horribly pimpled face, which, quite appropriately perhaps, bore a striking resemblance to that of Ganesha, the elephant God of food and plenty.

The alien heartbeats were growing louder, more frantic. As an individual entity, she herself was becoming smaller and smaller, as though she were made of some volatile substance which would ultimately evaporate into nothingness.

The overseer went through the formalities with the men first. Somewhere in the distance words were scattered, and the disembodied sounds wafted across by gusts of wind.

He was now addressing her, without caring to look at her. "What sort of work can you do?" he demanded in an insinuating bullying tone.

"Oh, any work which you would want me to do . . ."

It was someone else's voice that was answering and not her own.

"Have you ever worked before in a factory?" he continued

"Yes sir, for a few months in Sholapur . . ." It was a stranger's heart that was trying to break itself against her breast, and not her own.

"I mean was it in a silk factory?" The inquisitorial voice made the issue more precise—precise like a dagger point.

"No, it was in a cotton ginning factory as a waste-picker . . ." The echo of a stranger's anguish persisted in face of the dagger point. "But I will soon get to know any work that you would give me. I can assure you it won't take me long to learn it."

"Learn?" exploded the trunkless human incarnation of Ganesha. "Learn? But, sweetheart, what do you think this factory is meant to be? A house of learning—eh? You know very well what we want here—don't you? We want women reelers—that's what we want! And you don't know a thing about reeling—do you?" He posed the query but did not give her a chance to answer it. "Well, evidently, you are no good to us! Why the devil then do you come here to waste my time, eh?" He looked at her in righteous indignation and, for the first time since she had entered the room, had an opportunity of observing her closely. His glance was like a fine probe, inevitably moving towards the most intimate recesses of her body. And although, as an individual entirely, Mirnalni had ceased to be, and those were someone else's veins throbbing in her, she writhed in a kind of posthumous agony, shrinking almost to a point under those probing, violating eyes, "HUN . . ." He prolonged the nasal-monosyllable to an unmistakably indecent length, and finally relented his gaze, having completed the post-mortem as it were. "We want workers here—that is what we want. Workers . . ." He emphasised, "but did I hear you say you worked as a waste-picker in a ginning factory?"

"Yes," she replied ruefully.

"Ah, well in that case, we might have a vacancy in the waste department. I shall have to ask the foreman, though. Now that you have come perhaps we might be able to fix you up. And you don't look a bad girl . . ." he commented as an after-thought. "Well, you go and sit in the passage. When I have finished my work here, I shall see what I can do for you . . ."

He next turned his attention to the old woman. He appeared to be amused by her quaint, pathetic, crumbling figure. "Well," he ejaculated in very good-humour, "grandma, what do you want me to do for you? But you know . . ." he ventured a comic aside, "we are not a firm of undertakers here. Our business is to manufacture silk, not shrouds . . ."

Perhaps the woman was slightly deaf; or perhaps she was too preoccupied. But, apparently, she had not quite grasped the substance of the overseer's witty remark. "Can't you give me some work, son . . ." she began in a wailing tone, the ends of her phrases trailing off into the silence of other-worldly infinitudes like the notes of a remote dirge. "You will be good to me, son. I know you will." She implored, her cheeks trembling with emotion.

"Work? But, grandma, do be reasonable. We want young ones here, not septuagenarians . . ." He turned to the peon. "Ram Lal," he addressed him pleasantly, "we will have unweaned babies toddling up to us for work next. You better be quick and put up a notice: Unweaned Babies and Grandmothers Not Wanted . . ." He pronounced the words deliberately, pompously. Then he went into a short phlegmatic giggle at what he, no doubt, regarded as an excellent joke on his part. Ram Lal, the peon, grinned, too; painfully, it is true, but broadly as befitted the occasion; not so much in any genuine appreciation of his master's wit as in the interests of his monthly wage of twenty-five rupees. "Don't you think it should be put up at once?" The overseer was basking in the glory of his own sense of humour.

Ram Lal, the peon, who was being threatened by a Pathan money-lender to whom he owed a considerable sum, had no definite opinion on the matter. But in spite of his preoccupation with his personal misfortunes, he somehow managed to express, though somewhat tardily, his enthusiastic approval of his superior's suggestion.

The woman, however, still seemed to ignore the implications of this excursion into humour which were so obvious to everybody by now. "Ah, son," she bemoaned, "What do you want the young ones for?" There was a long pause in her lamentations. In the duration of that pause the meaning of that witty exchange between the two men appeared to dawn upon her and she broke out in loud and bitter abuse: "I know what you want them young ones for. You want to sleep with them—don't you? I am not so old neither. I could manage ten bed-wetters the like of you, I could . . ." she flung at him in a frenzy of bawdy outburst. Her whole frame shook as though in an epileptic attack.

The overseer had not anticipated such a turn of events. Considerably shaken in his self-complacency, he was quite at a loss against the flood of her vituperations. But in order not to betray that he had been taken at a disadvantage, he made a strategic and dignified retreat behind the impregnable barrier of his authority. "Get out, you old hag, or else I'll have you thrown out . . . Get out!" he said outwardly calm and unmoved. "Get out . . . Do you hear?" There was, nevertheless, a noticeable ring of fear in that serenely angry command.

"Ye'll have me thrown out—will ye?" she screamed hysterically, staggering towards the exit. "Ye're a fine one, I am old enough to be ye'r mother, and ye will have the cheek to have me thrown out . . ." She had cooled down for an instant, but only to break out again with a renewed vigour which surprised one. "Ye rotter! Wanting them young ones—do ye? Ye bed-wetter!" She turned round. Full of tears, her eyes bulged out of her sockets in indignation. "Ye want them young bitches like her . . ." she pointed murder-

ously towards Mirnalni who had been all this time wavering near the door. "And a bloody lot o' good it will do ye . . .licking their . . ."

At this juncture, Ram Lal, the peon, saved the situation by his timely intervention. He forcibly pushed the woman out of the room. She could be heard tumbling through the corridor.

By this time, the overseer had completely lost his sang-froid, finding his innocent attempt to introduce a touch of comedy into the dull routine take such a disastrous turn. Noticing Mirnalni still hesitating near the door, he fell upon her almost blood-thirstily. "Didn't I tell you to go and sit in the passage . . .?" he growled at her. "Or do you want me to have you thrown out as well? 'Ram Lal,' he shouted, hurling the ledgers about on the table, "why the devil do you stand there and stare at me like that? Ask the next bloody lot in. How many more are there, do you think?"

"About sixty . . ." Ram Lal was quick in adjusting himself to the overseer's new mood. The broad grin had disappeared in favour of a macabre solemnity. In a way he was relieved. His master's new mood was more in harmony with his personal predicament. The Pathan's threat had been couched in absolutely unequivocal terms. "Shall I send them away, sir,?" he offered.

"I didn't say anything of the kind—did I? You idiot," he scowled, unappeasably peevish. "I still want half-a-dozen ring-siders. Where the devil do you think I am going to find them . . .?" he raved in his chagrin.

Mirnalni walked out into the passage, mechanically. Without a will of her own and even uncertain of her physical movements, she stopped half-way down the corridor. She was drifting into a vast morass of vagueness. The waves of nausea rising and breaking against the strand of her nerves were the only certitude in the offing of her consciousness. Large quantities of saliva which she had to gulp every now and then were bitter and sickening, like brine.

It was dark in the passage. She had known darkness which descends on the earth like an ineffable silence ; and then again darkness which is alive with a multitude of lurking spirits. But here it was cold and oppressive. The chill in the air was beginning to close in on her like the gripping clasp of a frozen body. She felt herself contracting as though she were being interminably reduced and sub-divided. On the other hand her mind was becoming more and more diffuse. The burden she was carrying in her womb was the only solid landmark in her awareness. It was that which held her together physically and prevented her from fading out. The whole of her being seemed to crystallise itself round that horrible nucleus. But soon, she thought, she would break away from that sickening anchor and be blotted out against the all-enveloping nothingness. ,

Time passed. More men were being called in periodically. They emerged from the overseer's office and walked past her without taking the slightest notice of her existence. For others she had already ceased to be ; and soon, she imagined, she would cease to be even for herself. Then there would be no more hunger nor sickness.

The drizzle was now just a faint spray of silver moisture. Outside it had become much brighter. But the cold, burdensome gloom still haunted the passage. From time to time, for a fraction of a second, an impalpable mirage of tenderness seemed to tremble and vanish at the far end of her consciousness like the elusive phosphorescence of a glow worm across twilight wastes. What was it that it really signified, she couldn't understand, was too sick at heart even to make an effort to understand. "Mirna," she could hear the dim echo of a whispered anguish : "Promise you won't betray me . . ." And she could feel, too, the pressure of tormented fingers quivering in vain on the numb chords of her senses in a desperate attempt to transfigure the nature of things into a pattern not its own. But when one is in it . . .

The elaborate clockwork of the universe continued

to revolve at a uniform rate heedless of the difference of time and space—and the past, and the present, and the future. Two hundred miles away in the sericulture farm run by Messrs. Khambatta and Khambatta, Ltd., hosts of wriggling chrysalides were being released from the misery of birth and death in torture chambers into which not a drop of moisture was ever allowed to percolate. Endless lengths of pain were being drawn and woven into textures finer than gossamers.

Honk ! Honk. The brazen mouthpiece of Divinity was warning a recalcitrant sacred bell that even he, the chosen vehicle of Siva, was not immune from the exigencies of the Wheel of Law. Comet-like, the lemon-coloured limousine once again glided past an uncomprehending but enraptured crowd. Every downward thrust of the pistons was taking the youthful managing director of Messrs. Khambatta and Khambatta, Ltd. nearer the crucial moment of beatific vision. Above or below ? Below or above ? The evasive mole oscillated between heaven and earth in rhythm with the resiliency of the springs under the plushy seat. The well-fed, well-groomed managing director of Messrs. Khambatta and Khambatta, Ltd. let one of his hands dive precipitously into his waistcoat pocket and, like a juggler, produced a tiny box of digestive pills. With an air of supreme deliberateness and considered judgment, he swallowed four tablets, which were intended normally to suffice for two adults. Soon, he consoled himself, all his misgivings would be set at rest. The enigma on which the Zoroastrian wisdom could throw no light whatever would be revealed to him in flesh and blood. The past, the present, and the future would be made one in that long thrill of discovery.

The past, the present, and the future had been already made one in the eddies of nausea. Mirnalni could not keep on standing any longer. She had to crouch down on the floor in order not to go under those waves of sickness. Through the translucent veil of dusk memories came faint like the breath of passing life. What was it that the man had wanted to say ?

And how could one human being ever betray another ?

At last the overseer came out of his office. " You still waiting for me, lassie . . ? " he asked archly, walking very close to her.

She rose from the floor instantly. " Won't you give me some work . . ? " she pleaded feebly. Her mouth was bitter with gall. Down in the heaving entrails, the past, the present, and the future were being churned together into one agonizing sensation of dizziness.

" What am I to do ? " the incarnate Ganesha, minus the elephantine trunk, threw up his hands in a gesture of histrionic despair. " I have already engaged more people than I know what to do with." He nestled still closer to her, so that she could now feel the moist warmth of his breath against her face and even hear a soft phlegmatic grunt somewhere down in his lungs. " I don't really know what can be done now . . . "

The abysses were yawning under her feet. " Please don't turn me away like this . . . " A voice, not her own, begged without conviction or hope. " I don't know what I shall do if I don't find work here. I have nowhere to go. I am a stranger in this city . . . "

" Nowhere to go ? " The man was incredulous at first ; then pleasantly surprised : " but surely you have your people. Your husband, eh ? "

" No . . . " she mumbled briefly. She couldn't go into long explanations. She was fast tumbling into the void. And once one is in it, the past, the present, and the future are all equally unimportant.

But the man could draw his own conclusions. " No husband ? " he playfully touched her chin, " that's funny. I should have thought . . . " He did not reveal what he thought, but his thighs, which were now almost squeezing her against the wall, were more informative. Then he withdrew from her a little, struck a match and lit a *biri*. " Well, in that case, I suppose, I will have to fix you up. I think I can take you on in our waste department . . . " he offered generously, " it isn't difficult work by any means and you'll get eight annas a day for it, which isn't at all bad, you know. But, of course, it is like this.



After the factory hours, you will have to do some work for me at home. I live in Parel, not very far from here. I am quite alone ; no family or anything . . .” He explained in a loquacious but disinterested manner as though he was talking of somebody else’s affair and not his own. “I won’t put you to any arduous work. You can rest assured of that . . .” he grinned suggestively. “You can come in the evenings and tidy up the place a bit and perhaps cook a meal. That’s all. I don’t think you would mind that . . .” he gesticulated mildly, sucking at his *biri* in deep satisfaction, and blowing the smoke straight into her eyes. “Would you?” And, as he felt he was really doing it all for someone else, he was quite unashamed.

Mirnalni shook her head. On this point, the wife of the gatekeeper in the ginning factory at Sholapur had given her very definite and exhaustive instructions. And it was beyond her to see how one human being could ever be untrue to another.

“That’s perfect, then.” The overseer was beaming with delight at the success of his diplomatic mission. The plans were maturing exactly as he wanted them to. He looked round. As far as the eye could see down the corridor, there was nobody in sight. So he pushed himself forward in a compromising proximity to the woman and rudely felt for the curves of her buttocks, pinching them between his fingers every now and then. “They are good, these . . .” he whispered through an excessively watered mouth, “we two would be cosy together if you are a good girl . . .” He stroked the shivering hemispheres with increasing provocation. A deep pang of revulsion galvanised Mirnalni’s whole being into consciousness. There was cold sweat oozing from her forehead. Not that she objected to his taking liberties with her. She had known other men do that with her before. There was nothing in it ; nothing at all. Once one is in it, it doesn’t matter how one betrays someone else’s bitter anguish . . . .

“All right then . . .” the man continued. “Come into the office—will you ? I will enter your name in the

register. I will also give you two rupees as advance which I can deduct from your wages later. You can take a room somewhere near where I live. I think I can find you a nice cheap place. You needn't worry . . ." He was brimming with generosity.

They both went into the office.

"What's your name . . ." he asked her as she stood beside him near the table.

"Mirnalni . . ." she pronounced dimly. Even the alien voice was failing her, failing . . .

"Mirna . . . Mira . . . Mirnalni . . ." he murmured softly, meditatively. "That's a lovely name. It is just like you." He leered at her for a while wondering where exactly her loveliness did reside. Then he bent over the table to write her name in one of the registers. A beam of sunlight, which had penetrated through the smutty window, traversed the room diagonally and lit up the man's dark, flabby face, giving it a lurid yellow glisten, depriving it of the last vestige of humanity. But before Mirnalni could properly define her reaction to it there was a terrific upheaval. The weight of the unborn almost rose up to her gorge. She was violently sick and didn't even have time to turn away from the table. The feculent mass of her vomit was scattered all over the table. It had soiled the register and files as well as the overseer himself. A sickly smell filled the room.

The man jumped aside with the skill of an acrobat and stood for a while flabbergasted, contemplating the havoc. Then he began to dance in impotent rage, holding his nose in disgust. "What is the matter with you, you dirty bitch!" he roared. "You have ruined all my registers. Just look at them! Look at them! How the devil do you think I am going to get them cleaned? And just look what you have done to my suit! Couldn't you find somewhere else to vomit? Do you think this office is a latrine, you filthy whore?" What was it that he had thought so lovely and captivating about her? Was it her name or the tender folds of her buttocks? He couldn't remember. But he was certain it wasn't

her vomit. "And what the hell is the matter with you? Are you sick? Perhaps you have got cholera . . ." As this new possibility presented itself to him with all its horrible implications his anger was immediately changed into mortal dread. "I feel certain you have got that foul disease . . ." He receded still further from her, livid with fear, visualising the whole city, starting with himself, in the throes of death. "The papers say there is an epidemic raging in Sholapur. And now you have infected this place, you dirty bitch. . ." He pointed at her from a distance but dared not approach her.

Mirnalni continued having convulsions, oblivious of his vehement abuse—and the past, the present, and the future.

"Ram Lal . . . Ram Lal . . ." the man yelled in terror, flinging his jacket away from him, and running from one corner of the room to the other as if in a mad attempt to flee from himself and the army of invisible bacilli which was attacking him. "Ram Lal! Ram Lal!" The cry was poignant with the heartrending agony of a dying man.

And it was not lost on the wind. Ram Lal, the peon, popped up like a jack-in-the-box from nowhere. Perhaps he had been standing near the door all the while.

"Fetch me some water to wash myself. Quick! I must get rid of these clothes. They are polluted. Oh my God, they are infected . . .!" To and fro, he ran, to and fro like a pig being chased by some furious itch in his hind quarters. "But first turn this bitch out. She has got cholera. Oh! Oh! OH! . . ." He groaned in self-pity, imagining himself already on his death-bed. "We must have the place disinfected at once. But first turn the filthy bitch out. Quick! Just look at what she has done to my files and my tussore suit. What are you waiting for, you son of a swine? Turn the strumpet out . . . Turn her out . . ." he croaked.

Mirnalni was duly turned out. Later, as she wandered through the crowded streets, the dusk was already

fast thickening. Far away, across infinite distances, the anguish of the sun was being cooled against the soft green belly of the sea. But the clouds floating over the inflamed horizon were still like burning coals. Soon, however, they, too, would sink into the watery nihil and be extinguished.

Mirnalni stepped slowly, unheedfully. Her soul was an utter blank and oblivion. A strange, overwhelming calm had descended on her, the calm of a void. And when one is in it, the unreal distinctions between the past, the present, and the future are automatically obliterated.

Despite his wife's earnest protests and entreaties, the youthful managing director of Messrs. Kambatta & Khambatta, Ltd., insisted on forcing his way into the bathroom to watch her perform her elaborate toilet. In wanton disregard of the injunction of Zarathustra on the matter, he spent the enchanted twilight hour in the worship of the fruitful mystery in flesh and blood instead of wasting it in the propitiation of the infecund holy fire perpetually smouldering in the temples of Ahurmazda.

The enigmatic mole was, actually, below the navel !



## BOATMAN TARINI

*Tarashankar Bannerjee*

Boatman Tarini always walked with his shoulders bent. Unusually tall, he had too often bumped his head against lintels and branches of trees and the bamboo-ceilings of huts, and had learned his lesson. But on the river, punting his palm-bark ferry boat with a very long pole, he would bear himself absolutely erect.

It was the month of *Asharh*. Pilgrims were coming back after their holy dip in the Ganges. It was a tired crowd, mostly old women, hurrying to their homes across the Mayurakshi.

Tarini finished his smoke and shouted: "I can't take any more of you, mothers. You're all so heavy with the load of your piety!"

"Just one more, my good man," said an old woman, "this little boy . . ." while another called out, "Come along, Sabi, come quick. Be done with your laughing and jabbering, and don't let's see your devil's-bone teeth any longer!"

Sabi, or Sabitri, joking and laughing with a little crowd of girls from neighbouring villages, called back: "You go ahead—we're all going together the next trip."

The boatman intervened: "No, my dears, you come this trip. If your crowd comes along together, my boat'll sink, I'm sure!"

"If it must sink, Tarini," said the girl, "go down with the old ones. They've all bathed in the Ganges ten or twelve times, you know. They wouldn't mind dying, for they'd go straight to heaven! This was our first dip in the Ganges."

"I see, mothers, you've bought the Ganges waves in your head," said the boatman, and jumped on to the boat, and the crowd laughed. Kalachand, Tarini's mate, collected the fare from each person.

"Any more fares?" he shouted, and then pushed away from the shore. "God be praised!" called out Tarini as he shoved his pole against the river-bank.

"God be praised!" The pilgrims took up the cry, the woods on both shores resounded with it, while the swift-flowing river went by, unconcerned, laughing as it were, a low, cruel laugh.

"Kala, can't you get a good grip on the rudder?" growled Tarini, "can't you see the current, you fool?"

Tarini was right. The Mayurakshi is famous for its very strong current. For seven or eight months in the year the river is a desert—sands, sands stretching for a mile and a half. But when the rains come, she becomes terrible, demoniac. She races along, four or five miles wide, her deep grey water rushing like a torrent, swamping everything. There comes, on occasion, the Hārpa flood, when the water, six to seven cubits deep, rushes into the villages nearby and washes away homes and fields and granaries and all.

The sun was now oppressive, and a passenger opened his umbrella. "Don't you put up your sail, *Thakur* ;<sup>(1)</sup> don't you do such a thing," said Tarini. "Do you want to fly away!" The man promptly shut the umbrella.

Suddenly, there came a shriek from up river. Everyone in the boat looked up anxiously. "Be careful, all of you, you're all right," said Tarini. "A boat's sinking near Olkura landing stage . . . Hi, old mother, why do you tremble so? I say, Olkura, you look after her . . . There's nothing to fear . . . We are almost there."

"Now then, Kala, hold this pole, and be sharp about it," said Tarini, and plunged into the water and swam away from the boat. Some of the old women began to wail: "What'll happen to us, Tarini?"

"Shut up, you old hags," cursed Kala, "don't call out to him now, or you'll die, you'll die!"

In the grey water a little further on, one could see something white going down and bobbing up again. Tarini swam towards it, quietly, with easy strokes. When

(1) *A form of address.*

he came near, he had to plunge for it, and as he came on top again, was pulling something with one hand and swimming with the other.

The crowd on the shore was watching Tarini, with fear and anxiety. In a moment they cried, "God be praised!" And from the other shore came shouts, "Is everything all right? Is everything all right?"

Meanwhile, Kalachand brought the boat ashore.

Tarini was fortunate, for the girl he had rescued belonged to a prosperous family of the locality. Her boat was safe, but she had moved to sit near the edge, her long veil had made her misjudge the movement, and she had toppled over. She had swallowed some water, but not very much, and was soon restored to consciousness.

She was quite young, not much over sixteen, good looking, and wore a great many ornaments, earrings, a nose-ring, bangles and a necklace. She was still gasping for breath when her husband and father-in-law arrived on the scene.

Tarini bowed deeply to both, and the girl quickly put on her long veil.

"Don't be so shy, little mother," said Tarini, "but take a few deep breaths. They say that extra shyness brings you a lot of trouble."

"Tell me, Tarini," said the father-in-law, "what would you like to have?"

Tarini scratched his head for a while and then blurted out: "Oh give me the price of a pot of wine—eight annas."

"Don't be such a fool," said Sabi from the crowd. "Can't you ask for something more valuable?"

Tarini looked as if he had just grasped the situation, and smiled shyly, "Let me have a big nose-ring, Mr. Ghosh."

Sabi called out again, "O I say, Tarini, how the wife must shake her nose when she talks!" The good-humoured crowd laughed.

The girl whom Tarini had rescued now put out her fair hand, and on the palm was a gold nose-ring, shining



in the morning sun.

"Come over to our place, Tarini, during *Dazahara*," <sup>(1)</sup> said the girl's father-in-law, "and you'll have a *dhوتي* and *chaddar*." <sup>(2)</sup> And here is five rupees."

Tarini bent low in a grateful bow and mumbled, "If, sir, you could let me have a *sari* for the wife and not *dhوتي* for myself . . ."

"All right, that'll be all right," he laughed, "you'll have it."

"You must let us see your wife, Tarini," said the irrepressible Sabi.

"Oh! She's nothing to look at," said Tarini. "Nothing to look at, little mother!—She's dark and ugly!"

When Tarini got home that night, he was dead drunk.

Stumbling on the road, he was grouching to Kalachand, always his companion,—“Who's dug these holes, Kala? Holes, holes, holes!” Kalachand, equally drunk, could only mumble agreement.

"Let's swim home," Tarini went on, "don't you see, these holes will fill with water . . . But, there's no water here—it's all level—what is the matter, Kala?" There was no reply, and Tarini went ahead, flinging his arms about as if he was swimming.

Tarini's hut was in an outlying part of the village. And there was Sukhi, his wife, waiting for him with a lamp at the door.

The boatman was trying to sing about nose-rings, but Sukhi came up and stopped him. "Now then," she said, "stop that noise and come and eat your rice—it's cold . . . so, hurry."

Tarini pushed her back and said: "Rice! Rice! Go on with it now . . . you must put on the nose-ring first . . . Where did I put it?" . . . He was searching with uncertain fingers the folds of his *dhوتي* round the waist.

"One of these days you'll go to rescue someone and

(1) A Hindu Festival.

(2) Men's Garments.

be drowned yourself," said Sukhi, who had already heard of his morning's feat. "I'll hang myself if you do!"

"But why—what have I done?" said Tarini, a little bewildered, and then laughed, startling the tearful darkness of the rainy evening. "You can't fear your mother, can you now? And isn't the Mayurakshi a mother to me? I get what food I can because of her, don't I?"

Sukhi had not waited to listen, but was looking after his meal.

"Why don't you listen?" said Tarini as he went towards the kitchen, and catching Sukhi from behind, shouted: "You must come with me now and see the river!"

"Don't be a fool and worry me," she said, and Tarini shouted: "You must come—yes, a hundred times, yes. We'll go to the river and I'll jump in, with you on my back, and we shall come up again at Pauchthupi ghat."

"Yes, yes, that'll be all right," said Sukhi, to placate him, "but you must have your rice first, you must."

Tarini was going to flare up, but he had bumped his head against the door and sobered down. Eating his rice, he began: "Didn't I rescue a couple of cows that time? And that devil, Madan Gop, cheated me of fifteen rupees—fifteen rupees! A lot of money that was then. Who gave you those bangles? Tell me—which of your uncles did? . . . If that scoundrel Madan drowns in the river, I'll make him swallow something before I pull him out—I will, by God!" Sukhi, meanwhile, was unloosing his waistband, and found a nose-ring and three rupees.

"What have you done with the other two?" she asked.

"Oh, I gave it to Kala," said Tarini, a little guiltily.

Sukhi knew where he had been, but said nothing. Tarini began again. "That time, you remember, you were ill and I wasn't plying—the post was held up and the police officer couldn't go across, and then I was called, and out of my tips I got you that ear-ring, didn't I now? The river's been good to me, she has."

"Wait a bit," said Sukhi, "and let me put on this nose-ring."

Tarini was pleased. And as she was putting it on in front of her little mirror, he went on staring at her, forgetting his food. When she had finished, he raised the lantern and said: "Let me have a look at you, Sukhi."

Sukhi's face was transfigured in simple happiness.

Tarini had told a lie to Sabitri; Sukhi was pretty and slender, and not too dark, either.

The boatman was right about what he had said when drunk. It was, indeed, the Mayurakshi that gave him his living. Every year, on *Dazahara* day, he would worship the river. This year, too, he was worshipping as usual. He had put on a new *dhoti*, and Sukhi a new *sari*, both the gift of Mr. Ghosh. The rains had not started; the sandy bed of the river was glistening in the brilliant summer sun. "Worship her well, brother," said Kesto Das of Bhogpur village. "Let's have some good rain and floods, too—the farmers must live, mustn't they?"

The silt deposited by the river when it overflowed both banks produced golden crops.

"You are quite right," smiled Tarini. "Do you know what people say? They say I worship the river and ask for the floods! They forget, the fools, that the river is our mother and brings wealth to our country . . ."

After the ceremony was over Tarini drank heavily with his mate, Kalachand. "This time," said Kala, "if anyone drowns, I'll go and save him and get a reward—I will, you know!" Tarini laughed loudly: "What an idea! Kala to rescue people in the water—Ha! Ha!"

"What did you say, you devil?" shouted Kala, angrily. Tarini, too, was ready to have a go, but Sukhi intervened: "You see, when the floods come, if anyone's drowning this side of that *pakur* tree over there, you'll save him, and if beyond that line, you will." In a spasm of drunken gratitude, Kalachand burst into tears and took the dust of Sukhi's feet. <sup>(1)</sup> "You're good,

(1) A form of salutation.

sister, there's no one like you."

The next morning the two of them set about repairing the boat. They worked till dusk and made it look like new.

But the fierce sun soon made it crack. Throughout *Asharh*, the floods did not come. It did not even rain heavily enough to do more than wet the sand on the river. Disaster was in the air; one could hear, as it were, a low, plaintive cry from the land. Or perhaps disaster had come already somewhere near and was sending forth its premonition. Tarini could hardly earn enough to live. He would get a few coppers when some minor official would let him carry his bicycle across the sands, but that would hardly pay for his drinks. Officials, however, began suddenly to come pretty often—to inquire if there was any distress! They would leave behind them nothing but a few shrivelled cigarette-ends.

But the rains came next month. Tarini breathed happily again and dived into the water from the tall river bank and swam with boyish exhilaration.

After three days, however, the water was only knee-deep. Tarini and Kalachand were waiting, with their boat tied to a tree in the hope that some gentleman might want to go across and they would just push the boat along for him.

It was nearly evening, and no one had come. "It's funny, Kala," said Tarini. "Yes," agreed Kala in a bewildered voice. "I have never seen such a thing in all my life."

"Yes."

"Look at the western sky," said Tarini, "it's just blue—not a cloud anywhere and not a sound in the sky."

"Yes," said Kala.

Tarini got suddenly furious and slapped his mate: "Yes! Yes! Yes! How I despise your yes! Yes! Yes!"

Kala only looked at Tarini in a foolish and embarrassed way. He wasn't even resentful. Tarini felt he couldn't stand it much longer but, looking away, went on sitting inert.

After a while, he turned round suddenly : " The wind has changed, Kala—it's from the west . . . Let me see . . ." He poured down very slowly a handful of sand to find out if it was the west wind. " Hum ! It's from the west—just . . . Come on, Kala, let's go and have a drink. I've got two annas to-day. Sukhi had it tied in a corner of her *sari* and I pinched it."

Kalachand came back to life, happy at this cordial invitation. He followed Tarini, and said : " Your wife has got more dough, *dada*.<sup>(2)</sup> You'll have your rice all right when you go home . . . We're done for."

" Sukhi's a good girl, Kala, a very good girl," said Tarini. " I don't know what I could do without her. That time when my brother was getting married—"

" One moment, *dada*," Kala interrupted, " I'll pick up that *tal*<sup>(1)</sup> over there." He ran into the field nearby.

A small crowd was squatting under a tree. " Where do you people come from and where are you going ?" asked Tarini.

One of them murmured : " We are from Birchandpur brother. We're going to Burdwan—there'll be work for us there, we hope."

" Has it rained well in Burdwan ?"

" No, there hasn't been much rain, but there's a canal, you know."

Soon disaster came to the country. Famine had lain concealed under the earth, and now that the ground was cracking under the fierce sun, it was showing its gruesome face. The farmer who had a little stock shut his door to all comers, and the poor peasants starved. People were flocking away from their homes.

That morning Tarini went to the river and found Kalachand absent. The day grew hotter, but Kalachand did not come. Tarini went to his hut and shouted his name, but there was no reply. He entered the hut and found not a soul there. It was the same with the next

(1) *Brother*

(2) *A kind of fruit.*

hut, too. . . The whole neighbourhood, it seemed, had left. He made enquiries and found that everybody in Kala's neighbourhood had left the night before.

"You know, Tarini, I told him again and again not to go," said Haru Mondol, "he just didn't listen, said he'd go to a rich village and beg!" Tarini was feeling too large a lump in his throat to reply.

"Are there any rich men in the country?" went on Haru. "They're all gone. And some of them are in a pretty bad way—they'll starve, but they must keep quiet about it. That village—let me see, yes—Palash-danga—there a gentleman put a rope round his neck the other day. He had nothing to eat, poor man!"

A revolting sight met Tarini's eyes the next day. The corpse of an old woman was lying there, jackals and dogs had torn off her limbs at night. Tarini could recognise her; she was a paralytic, and perhaps the night before, her family—they were cobblers—had left her there, in a hurry to leave the stricken village.

He did not linger there, but went straight home and said to his wife, "Come along, Sukhi, tie a few *saris* and some ornaments round your waist, and then we'll go . . . We may find work in the town."

When they were going, Tarini noticed that Sukhi had no ornaments. Surprised, he asked her what had happened to them.

Sukhi smiled drily: "How d'you think I ran the house all this time?"

\* \* \* \* \*

They had trudged for three days and had taken shelter for the night on the outskirts of a village. Two ripe *tals* which had dropped from a nearby tree were their dinner. "Let me have your towel for a moment," said Tarini, and hung it on a bough, watching it closely. At dawn, Sukhi found him sitting in the same posture.

"Didn't you sleep well?" she reproached him. "I'll be in a real pretty mess if you're ill. Why does a man like you leave his home, I ask you."

Tarini ignored her and after a minute, cried out to

her : "Have you seen it, Sukhi, have you seen it ?"

"What on earth have I seen ? I don't understand your ways, I don't."

"Look," said Tarini, "the ants are going up the trees with their eggs in their mouths. It's going to rain, I'm sure it will."

"You have some pretty ideas in your head," said Sukhi.

"But you don't know, Sukhi, they have a premonition, they always go up trees when the rains are coming . . . And look, the breeze now is coming right from the west."

"But the sky is just dry and shining . . . you have some ideas, I tell you."

Tarini was looking the other way. "It doesn't take long for the clouds to come over . . . And look, the crows are picking up dried-up twigs to 'fortify' their nests . . . Let's stay here, Sukhi, and see if it rains."

The boatman's practised observation had not been wrong. Towards the evening, the sky was overcast with clouds, the west wind blew sharper and sharper.

"Get up, Sukhi, we'll go back now," said Tarini.

"At this time of the day ?"

"You aren't afraid of the dark, dear ? I'm with you, ain't I ? Come along now—there's a good girl—and put that *mathali*<sup>(1)</sup> on your head. Drizzles are dangerous."

"What about yourself ?" asked Sukhi, "I guess your body's made of stone !"

"Yes," laughed Tarini, "Rain is my friend, you know. I just get dried up in the sun and revel in the rain ! Come along then, and give me that load."

It would rain hard for some time and then the cheerless wind would drop and it wouldn't rain. But soon after the wind would rise, and rain would come down in torrents.

They reached home in two days—it had taken them three days on the way out. It was evening, and Tarini ran to see what the river was like, returning to report

(1) A covering for the head made of palm leaves.

happily to Sukhi that the water was nearly overflowing the banks.

Next morning, Tarini got ready for the river. The sky was heavy and dark, it was raining in torrents, and the wind was high. He returned at midday and said to Sukhi, "I must go at once to the smith's."

"You must have something to eat before you go," said Sukhi, anxiously.

"No," replied Tarini, "the boat needs a new peg. The river is rising, or I might somehow have managed."

"Come and see the river," he said, and dragged Sukhi to the bank. The tumultuous beauty of the Mayurakshi was fascinating. You could hardly see the other bank, the water was like scarlet, and the white foam on the waves looked like fast-moving flowers. "You hear her roar, Sukhi, don't you?" said Tarini, "but it'll be worse, I fear . . . You go home quick; I must somehow take the post across tomorrow . . ."

"But how can you?" Sukhi complained, "This weather—" Tarini would not listen and moved away.

He returned after dusk—in a hurry and rather worried. Doog! Doog! Doog! What was that. . . Oh, he knew what it meant—impending danger. The floods were coming, not the sort that was good for his trade.

To get home, he had to pass a bamboo bridge over a usually innocuous tributary of the Mayurakshi that skirted his village. Tarini could walk back home blindfolded, but this time he could not find the bridge. Where it should have been there was just water, and soon he had to pull his *dhotu* up to keep it from getting wet. He could hear a disquieting roar—the swish of the wind and the sound of the rapidly advancing water. Soon, insects attacked his body—even they were scurrying away from their underground cells in a vain search for safety!

Tarini jumped into the water and swam into his village. But the floods had reached there before him. The water was everywhere; some of the villagers, holding precariously to an elevation, were shouting piteously to one another for help. How the cows and



goats and sheep and dogs can moan in distress, too ! One could hear above everything the roar of the Mayurakshi, the noise of the downpour and the cruel laughter of the winds . . . It was as if plundering bandits were laughing and shouting down the cries of their terrified victims.

One could not find one's way very easily in the dark. Tarini's feet once touched something which felt like an animal. He bent down and picked it up—a small lamb, dead. He threw it away, reached his hut somehow and shouted for all he was worth, "Sukhi ! Are you there ? Sukhi !"

"Thank all the gods in heaven," he thought, when he heard Sukhi answer : "I'm here . . . Come and see !"

In the small courtyard, the water was waist-deep. On the plinth it was about knee-deep, and there Sukhi was standing with fear in her eyes, holding on to a bamboo overhead.

"Come right out from here," Tarini said as he dragged her, "how can you stay here ? The whole thing will collapse soon."

"I was waiting for you," said Sukhi, "Where else could you have looked for me ?"

Soon they were on the road in waist-deep water. "What can we do, Sukhi ?" said Tarini, in a shaky voice.

"Don't worry over much . . . Everyone's in the same boat."

"If the flood rises still . . . You hear the roar ?"

"It can't, my life," said Sukhi, with a woman's strange insouciance. "What'll happen to the country then ? God can't destroy His own creation, can He now ?"

Suddenly, there was a heavy splash on the water. "That's our home—gone," said Tarini, in a broken voice, "let's get away . . . it's nearly breast-deep for you here !

"Help ! Help !" someone was shouting, "My baby's gone ! Baby ! Baby !"

"I'll go and see," said Tarini, reckless even in desperation. "You be here, darling, and mind you answer me when I call."

Tarini plunged into the darkness. "Whereabouts is the baby?"

"Hi! This way . . .! This way!"

"I'm coming."

An interchange of vocal gestures—for words could hardly be differentiated—went on for a while and then all was quiet. Almost immediately after, Tarini called out: "Sukhi! Sukhi!"

"Here I am!" she replied. Tarini came towards her voice, and when he could see her, said: "It looks bad, Sukhi . . .hold on to my waist."

Sukhi said nothing. She caught hold of Tarini's *dhoti* round the waist, and after a while, said: "Whose child was it? Could you save him?"

"Yes, it was Bhupte Bhalla's boy."

They were wading carefully through the water but it was getting more and more difficult. "Get on to my back, Sukhi," said Tarini, "but . . .where are we? where . . .?"

Before he could finish, they both found themselves in very deep water. "I'm afraid it's the river, Sukhi," said Tarini, when he floated up, "just hold on to my *dhoti* and try to float."

They were moving fast in the current. It was pitch dark, the wind was whistling in their ears—a swishing noise, mingling uncannily with the roar of the river in flood. The rain was pelting them, arrow-sharp against their faces. They were floating like straws—for how long, they did not know. Their limbs were slowly growing stiff; the cruel waves would sometimes almost suffocate them. And Sukhi's fist felt funny, thought Tarini anxiously, was she getting heavier too . . .? "Sukhi! Sukhi!" he cried.

"Yan," came the dazed reply.

"Don't fear, my love, I'm here—"

But the next moment Tarini knew they were drowning, going round and round in a whirl. He would never be beaten he thought, not by the river he loved, but Sukhi . . . With all his strength, he managed to get on top with her, but he knew there was danger ahead again—

the whirlpool was no easy matter. He tried to get away from it—but Sukhi had clasped him tight with her arms. “Sukhi! Sukhi!” he cried, but there was no reply.

They were going round and round again, and they were drowning, no mistake about it. Tarini felt his limbs stiffening in Sukhi's desperate embrace . . . Was she alive . . . ? He himself was gasping for breath . . . he could not bear it . . . In a moment his hands were round Sukhi's throat . . . he was mad . . . all his strength had flowed to his hands. If only he could get the load off him, he would live . . . Ah! Ah! He took deep breaths . . . he was absurdly relieved . . . he wanted light and the touch of the land . . . he wasn't dead.

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

### RABINDRANATH TAGORE

A pioneer in many diverse cultural fields, he was also a leader in developing the short story as a medium of literary expression. His stories represent quite as important an order of achievement as his poetry and remain so far the most authentic interpretations of the Indian life and scene. Several collections of his short stories have already appeared in English translation. Among these, the best known are *Hungry Stones and other Stories* and *Mashi*.

### SARAT CHANDRA CHATTERJEE

In contemporary Bengali literature he occupies a position second in importance only to Tagore. He was one of the first Bengali writers to break away from the stultifying tradition of sentimental romanticism and to experiment with social realism. His story *Drought* first appeared in this country in the "*Left Review*."

### PREM CHAND

Is the *nom de plume* of one of the most significant modern writers in Hindustani, Dhanpat Rai Srivastva, who died in 1936. His first collection of short stories entitled "*Sauz-e-Watan*" (Patriotism) appeared in 1901, and was ordered to be burnt publicly by the District Commissioner on the ground of being seditious. Although his work is little known outside India, it has exercised a powerful influence over the younger generation of Indian writers. He presided over the first Conference of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association.

### RAJA RAO

Comes from Mysore State, and, before the outbreak of the Second World War, lived for many years in France where his writings have found wide appreciation. He writes in English, but has evolved a rhythmic style

peculiarly suited to his material and possessed of a rare poetic quality. His novel *Kanthapura* was published in England in 1938, and his stories have appeared in various American, French, and British literary reviews. *Javni* by which he is represented here was first published in *Asia*.

#### MULK RAJ ANAND

Comes from the Punjab and is one of the most distinguished and versatile of Indian writers writing in English. He has published several novels, among which are *The Untouchable*, *Sword and the Sickle*, *Coolie* and the *Big Heart*. As in his novels so in his short stories he is preoccupied with social themes which are interpreted through a vivid imagination and deep psychological insight.

#### SAADAT HUSSAIN MINTO

In a country where fiction writing is largely the province of amateur effort, Minto represents the still small but growing voice of the professional in this field. His stories reveal a healthy interest in technique, craftsmanship and humour. He is a prolific writer, and though still in the early thirties, has already published several volumes of short stories. *The Coachman and the New Constitution* first appeared in English translation in "*Indian Writing*."

#### AHMED ALI

Is a lecturer in English at Calcutta University, but comes from Delhi which is the scene of his novel *Twilight in Delhi*, published in England in 1940. He first acquired literary prominence—or to be more exact, notoriety—when, in collaboration with a number of younger writers, he published a collection of experimental short stories entitled "*Angare*" (Sparks). This so offended the delicate susceptibilities of the champions of moral rectitude that on their instigation the book was publicly burned in many places. However, his reputa-

tion as an iconoclast is as undeserved as it is misleading. Much of his writing is modulated on a grave, elegaic note of deep nostalgia which borders on poetry. *Our Lane* first appeared in English in "*New Writing*."

#### R. K. NARAYAN

Comes from Mysore State. A writer of great promise, his work has been compared with that of Anton Tchekhov by discriminating critics. The comparison is not without justification. There is something undoubtedly reminiscent of Tchekhov's world in the inconsequential humour and ineffectual pathos of Narayan's characters. As a stylist, he is distinguished by a combination of purity and elegance which is almost classical. He has published several novels, among them *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Dark Room*, and *The English Teacher*.

#### ISMAT CHUGTAI

Two trends have already emerged in the imaginative writing of contemporary India. There is a school of writers possessed of a missionary zeal for whom literature is but a weapon of social critique and an instrument of change. But there is another school of writers who do not aspire to any didactic purpose but are content merely with observing the subtle pattern of human relations and responses. Ismat Chughtai belongs to the latter school. His work reveals an extraordinary depth and delicacy of sensibility. *Little Mother* is his first story to appear in English translation.

#### ALAGU SUBRAMANIAM

Comes from Ceylon and has been living in London for the past ten years. He has contributed stories to, "*Life and Letters*," "*Left Review*," "*Tribune*," etc. Though young, he has already evolved a distinctive style of his own and his stories show an unusual structural cohesion and mastery of his material. *The Mathematician* has already appeared in "*Indian Writing*" of which he was a co-editor.

## JUGAL KISHORE SHUKLA

One of a group of younger writers in Hindustani who are profoundly moved by the condition of the vast suffering humanity of India. He has written infrequently, but always with a passionate fervour and quick human sympathy which gives his work, even when it may lack form and precision, compelling interest. *One Day* was first published in England in "*New Writing*."

## ATTIYA HABIBULLAH

She can with justice be regarded as a phenomenon symptomatic of the contemporary Indian renaissance—a woman interpreting Indian life through her own delicate vision. Her work is characterised by a peculiarly individual imaginative refinement and possesses a distinct element of symbolism as illustrated by her story *The Parrot in a Cage* which first appeared in "*Indian Writing*."

## K. AHMED ABBAS

A young writer of growing reputation he is a working journalist on the staff of the "*Bombay Chronicle*." He has taken a prominent part in initiating the "People's Theatre Movement" and has published "*Outside India*"—a highly entertaining travelogue dealing with his visit to the New World.

## RAJA RATNAM

Forms a literary link between India and the countries of South East Asia. His early years were spent in Malaya but the background of experience there is so similar to that of India that it has not resulted in any psychological estrangement. He has contributed stories to "*Asia*," "*Life and Letters*," and other British and American periodicals.

## IQBAL SINGH

Comes from the Punjab. "*When One is in it*," an essentially experimental story, was first published by the "*Progress Writers' Association*" in London.

## TARASHANKAR BANNERJEE

A Bengali writer of considerable talent, his work has not yet found outside Bengal the appreciation it deserves. His stories provide an authentic picture of riverine Bengal. *Boatman Tarini* appears for the first time in English translation in this collection.

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